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## Methodological aspects of the development of regional studies courses — Evidence from the Arab countries studies course

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### Abstract

The paper presents analysis of a new kind of educational courses based on multidisciplinary approach. The course synthesizes the methodologies and advances of regional studies and regional geography, cultural and cross-cultural studies and communication, oriental studies, civilization studies, second language acquisition and second language teaching. The course is a part of a wider language program elaborated and implemented at NRU HSE (Saint Petersburg) and bases essentially on the inclusive strategies of Arab countries study, primarily language learning techniques (Arabic). It requires preliminary commandment of elementary course of Arabic. This study aims to analyze a year's experience of constructing the Arab countries studies course and its teaching process, and to evaluate the merits and demerits of its aspects, taking into account the peculiarities of the academic activity, language skills, basic dictionary, and comparative analysis of several similar courses.

**Keywords:** Arab language, lingual cultural studies, Arab countries, methods of teaching, regional geography, oriental studies.

### Intro

#### Why Arab world?

The world has become more complex in recent years. The worldwide movement toward economic, financial, trade, and communications integration and globalization is driven by international relations and aided by informational technology. This process affects the environment, culture, political systems, and economic development in societies around the world. Globalization is not new, though it calls the shots. This is why nowadays more than ever the specialists with vast knowledge in countries' studies and languages are in demand.

There is clear evidence that Arab countries play a crucial role in the world and modern geopolitics. In terms of the economy, OPEC countries (7 out of 13 of them are Arab nations) control about 2/3 of the world's oil reserves. They account for ~ 35% of world production, or half the world's oil export. As we know, the Arab countries jointly control the price and sales volume of crude oil on the world market. This, without doubt, affects the global economy.

The countries of the Middle East and North Africa have a pivotal role in international politics and social life. For instance, if we consider the

recent story of the Arab uprisings of 2010-11, we see generally acknowledged opinion that the uprisings themselves were very much a region-wide phenomenon. However, the initial uprisings then clearly cannot be understood without an appreciation of their regional and international dynamics. The world has become “East oriented”, developed countries are fighting eastern governments or searching for allies among them, as well as some developing ones. The result of this struggle influences the distribution of forces in the region and in the world itself.

### **Why Arabic?**

In the process of intercultural communication prerequisites for adaptation to a different ethno-linguistic environment one needs to have a wide knowledge of the region under study and the norms of communicative behavior, which make up the concept of speech, along with speech etiquette.

Given the socio-cultural and ethnic specificity of the Arabic language conditions, one can not underestimate the value related to and associated with oriental studies subjects — lingual cultural studies, ethno linguistics, sociolinguistics, ethnography, philological training, the practical application of the skills for everyday communication in Arabic, etc. We need to pay attention to the extra linguistic components, primarily the willingness of students and their ability to perform active and correct discussions bearing in mind the basic facts of national mentality, to express the reaction in a prepared or spontaneous speech in Arabic language. To communicate in the Arabic-speaking environment, one must not only have knowledge of the language, but also the developed background “as a mutual knowledge of the realities of the speaker and the listener, which is the basis of linguistic communication” [Кухарева 2008: 8] to be understood.

### **Why Arab world better in Arabic?**

The importance of the formation of linguacultural studies competence of Arabists is linked to several factors. The most important of them is that the Arab world, despite the current tragic political and economic situation, for centuries has been formed in a certain manner, and the community is based on a common language (Arabic literature), a single culture (in most cases Muslim), and a single story. This led to the appearance of certain common traits

amongst Arab peoples, the knowledge of which may facilitate mutual understanding between different cultures.

On the other hand, we must take into account the fact that each Arab country is a unique socio-cultural unit, which bears the imprint of the ethnic specificity and individual features of geography and historical development. In Arab countries, along with common traditions and customs associated mainly with the Arab-Muslim culture, there are national and religious traditions preserved from ancient times and observed by representatives of ethnic and religious groups living in the territory of one or another Arab country.

Knowledge of these characteristics, history, culture, traditions and customs of the peoples of the Arab countries would lead to better integration in the environment. Formation of the linguacultural studies competence of Arabists is the way to educate them in the true tolerance, under which the modern scientific community understands the recognition of the diversity of cultures and their equality. This is why I suggest that a language course should be based on culture/tradition/economy/politics approach.

Background in cultural and ethnic spheres plays a crucial role in communication. Cultural intelligence is an important step towards cultural competence. Acquiring practical intercultural skills is the hardest part of cross-cultural learning. Being familiar with cross-cultural communication does not just imply having a vague or rudimentary idea of what this or that expression means and how it works. In order to become interculturally effective one need to understand the concept with all its components. Moreover, he/she should be able to translate the theory into an action. We could put it this way: Intercultural competence is about what you know and what you feel. Awareness – knowledge – skills are therefore three basic training steps [Kincaid 1988: 289; Morgan, Byram 1994: 5; Scollon & Scollon 2001; Wiseman 2003].

However, few courses have this culture-based teaching component of Arabic, so the status of Arabic is underestimated or ignored. Among subjects in the humanities, Oriental studies are unique in introducing students to civilizations that are completely different from the Western ones more familiar for them. A degree in Oriental studies is not a vocational degree. However, a wide range of employers appreciate the skills the graduates gain. Career

options are available in finance, the media, commerce, law, interpreting and translating, the arts, etc. These issues create a kind of a challenge for the teachers, and the question arises: are there ways to provide students with the necessary basic knowledge in all these fields, and alongside this to develop their skills in the language they just started to learn, especially when being limited in time?

Few courses nowadays focus on the tasks in hand. In many universities of Russia and other countries we see special courses qualifying students in single areas of knowledge. In view of this background and taking into account positive and negative impacts, we consider the central question that motivates this paper: whether it is worth combining the teaching of these aspects and at the same time increasing the language level, to be precise – Arab countries and Arabic language, to highlight the most important issues with training listening, reading and speaking skills, and to explore the ways to implement this course in the program of the second year students with the beginner level of Arabic language.

In this paper you see the analysis of the concept of the new Arab countries studying course (ACSC) which was launched this academic year by the Department of Asian and African studies at the National Research University the HSE — St. Petersburg as part to the Basic Arabic language studies program for second year students. How to generate a special course to cover a wide range of historical, geographical, socio-economic and cultural issues? What way will be the most effective? What is worth special attention? I argue that such kind of course would solve the number of listed problems and it is useful. In this paper, I review pedagogical approaches to teaching Arabic (weaknesses and strengths), and analyze empirical approaches to evaluate the course and create its theoretical framework.

#### Literature Review

In this paper a new kind of educational courses based on multidisciplinary approach was analyzed. The course synthesizes the methodologies and advances of regional studies and regional geography, cultural and cross-cultural studies and communication, oriental studies, civilization studies, second language acquisition and second language teaching. This approach makes us examine several spheres of knowledge and identify an appropriate context for bringing the research.

First of all we need to understand what the linguistic features of Arabic are by making a review of basic textbooks like the one written by the professor of Saint-Petersburg State University Frolova O.B. [Фролова 2001] or the lexicographical work by Wehr H. [Wehr 1979]. Also there are Arabic textbooks for the learners of different levels, that give us material on a wide range of issues [سوردي ميحرلا دب ع 1418 هـ; خيشلا دمحم د. 2008]. Works on diglossia and grammar may help to build the background of the course [Al-Batal 1992; Kouloughli 1979]. There many related articles, one that was very useful for our research is “Proficiency in Arabic language learning: Some reflections on basic goals” by Peter Heath [Heath 1990].

Teaching of the language is slightly possible without learning vocabulary and having knowledge on teaching and learning process, its methods. Theories of learning, whether explicit or tacit, are informed by study or intuition, well-considered or not, and play a role in the choices instructors make concerning their teaching. What method of teaching should we choose? How to avoid the inclination of students to rote learn rather than develop any real understanding of the content? To identify the general topics and to make conclusions for providing a context of the paper we made an analysis of a number of handbooks related to the topic. “Teaching and Learning Language and Culture” by Morgan Carol [Morgan, Byram 1994] helped us to understand and compare the ways of teaching culture through the language. In addition, new teaching approaches are brightly shown in the book by Nielsen H.L. [Nielsen 1996] Moreover, a detailed section on the ways of teaching for Arabic language professionals expands the horizons of teaching in 21st century [Wahba, Taha 2006].

To identify the borders of the studying material and to get a view on the subject itself it seemed reasonable to compare similar courses, try to find courses close to the ACSC in its purposes, region of study, ways of interpreting the material (through the language). So we made an attempt and searched for the courses available in open access [Bocharova; Stremovskaya; Zaharova; Vlasova 2010; Komova, Mikoian, Anisimova, Baranova, Levashev 2004]. Unfortunately the courses we found are greatly different so we had no opportunity to create common criteria for the comparison.

We face the challenge of combining or synthesize the language learning with other

spheres of knowledge that makes a complex idea of the Arab world. So it is reasonable to examine the works on linguistic and cultural studies [.. زيزعت] and also the samples of such kind of courses. Theories on the intercultural communication are of great importance as well [Kincaid 1988: 289; Scollon & Scollon 2001; Wiseman 2003]. There is work of Kovirshina N. B. that was taken as a starting point for our ACSC [Kovirshina 1999].

While constructing the course there were used a lot of books and manuals on the geography [Куликов 2011], history [Васильев 2003; Захарова 2011; Ирмияева 2001; Шумов, Андреев 2002], economics [Али-Заде 2010; Али-Заде 2011; Куликов, Меликова 2010], philosophy [История философии 1996] and literature [Арабская литература... 1975; Арабская литература... 1970; Литература арабских стран 1977; Литература Северной Африки 1987; Литературный энциклопедический словарь 1990] of the region of the Middle East and North Africa. In building the course we also used encyclopedias and atlases [Атлас Чудес Света... 2007; Африка... 1986; Большая иллюстрированная энциклопедия... 2004; Весь мир... 2001; Внуков 2000; Географический справочник... 2005; Основные факты... 2005; Рыжов 2004; Страны и народы... 1982; Страны мира... 2004; Энциклопедия... 2001a; Энциклопедия... 2001b].

Islam plays a crucial role in all the spheres of life in the region of the Middle East and North Africa from the early Middle Ages; it is hardly possible to understand the great amount of social patterns, clichés, and linguistic features without knowledge of the topic [Ислам как религия... 1994: 311–343; Ислам... 1991; Коран... 1990; Коран... 2003; Рукайя 2002; Родионов 2003]. Also Islam has been affected by contemporary political movements, national policies, economic needs and cultural patterns. That makes the problem even more complex.

The distinguishing and unique feature of our ACSC is that it aims to expand social competence in the use of the studied (east foreign) language with respect to various aspects; to form students' skills of pragmatic thinking on the material of a foreign language (Arabic) language. Students need to master complex knowledge about the countries of the target language to adequately understand and interpret different types of texts [Джамиль 2006; Власова 2010; Ибрагимов 2007; Ибрагимов 2007; Ибрагимов 2007; Семенова 1979]. So in addition to the textbooks we referred

to electronic resources of texts, newspapers [خال او نامزلا، قريزجل، مارهال، قباوبل], video portals, social nets, governmental official sites to have an opportunity to train the language on the modern materials, get online information, and be kept up-to-date of the latest news.

#### **Linguistic features of Arabic**

Arabic is an Afro-Asiatic Semitic language closely related to Maltese, Aramaic or Hebrew. The linguistic situation in the Arab world is conventionally characterized by diglossia, which refers to the existence of two forms of language: the formal and the vernacular ones. In the universities we usually study Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) — the contemporary offspring of the classical language that is used across the Arab World, but is generally confined to writing and formal contexts: literature, newspapers, education, radio/television news programs, political speeches, and so forth. However, of course students have also to learn a regional vernacular Arabic, used in everyday informal transactions. Both varieties are widely used and differences between them are brightly exhibited in syntax, morphology, phonetics, and semantics.

Anyone learning MSA will likely want to actually hold conversations while abroad. Communicating with locals means leaving classical MSA behind and entering into the diverse world of spoken Arabic dialects. This is the heart of diglossia, when a language has different written and spoken varieties. One can have problems with involvement into cultural communication without knowing specificities of a number of dialects.

Due to such linguistic situation in Arab countries, the teacher and the student have to face the fact that there is more to be learned than one language, at least surely more than is usually attempted in a single language course. Moreover, Arabic has no principal or dominant dialect; there is a wide variety of vernaculars from Iraqi and Syrian to Egyptian and Moroccan. In addition, there are intermediate forms of language while native speakers tend to mix elements of Standard Arabic and different dialects in a rather variable way. Therefore, it would be better for the student to get some basic structures of some of these dialects and have an opportunity to listen to them as much as possible on the lessons with the comments of a teacher. This task was set as a goal. Although, our course is not a course of basic grammar or a dialect, or geography, or politics precisely, it is supposed to support the learning of regional

characteristics on the basis of MSA grammar with giving the learners the slight idea of numerous Arabic dialects, and to make a rough picture of the Arab world through and with the use of language.

There exist several approaches of teaching Arabic. Each of them has its own merits and demerits. First of all, the most widely used and the oldest approach is the Classical one. Instructions are based mainly on morphological and syntactic analyses of texts, using the method of grammar and translation with very limited attention paid to the oral component. This way is beneficial for the first steps of learning the language and providing the “basement”. However, following this method through the whole period of studying leads to the acquisition of limited number of skills. In this case, due to the effects of the new developments in foreign language education at the end of the 20th century the oral component of MSA courses began to receive increasing attention.

The second approach that should be paid attention to is the Colloquial one, based on the teaching of a specific Arabic dialect, or a specific regional dialectal group (Gulf, North African for instance) for oral use. This approach is used mainly in commercial courses, or individual lessons, it doesn't require any knowledge of MSA or even of Arabic script [Heath 1990: 31–48], since in the vast majority of colloquial textbooks transliteration is used. This approach is very helpful as an additional experience.

In the last years for training of specialists with the major in Arabic there used the Middle language or the so called Simultaneous approach that seems to provide an adequate answer to the question of how to deal with Arabic diglossia. This type of teaching Arabic is based on the methods of learning of variety between MSA and the dialects [Al-Batal 1992: 284–304]. Programs based on this approach usually divide the linguistic skills across the varieties: reading and writing are taught in MSA and speaking and listening in dialect or with some parts in the dialect. This aims to mirror the linguistic situation in the Arab world and emphasize the communicative importance of being able to switch on the speech continuum, if we speak about the role of communication aspect in teaching languages [Holes 1990: 36–41; Kouloughli 1979: 125–34; Nielsen 1996].

We decided in our course to make MSA the priority due to the target audience of the second year students, so the majority of texts, audio materials are on Standard Arabic, but we

involve some dialect phrases and words from each country under the study. This gives an opportunity to pick up some cultural clichés, train listening skill, and to prepare students to the further practice of the dialect course of the third year.

To reach this goal while preparing materials for the lessons, we try to choose audio and video files with implementation of parts of spoken dialects, for instance interviews, reportages, some TV shows or parts of movies. This sampling enables to introduce students to practice of oral language consistently, step by step understanding the differences and learning basic vocabulary.

#### **Vocabulary and teaching differences**

The other issue that is usually discussed if we speak about teaching Arabic or other foreign language is the teaching of vocabulary. Arabic vocabulary learning is of particular importance. Unfortunately, this importance is currently not properly reflected in textbooks.

Vocabulary is a basic component of language proficiency that provides the basis of learners' ability to speak, listen, read, and write. The teaching of it should be incorporated in all stages of the second language learning. At lower levels, the use of paired lists of new words can help students to focus on the vocabulary, as addition to class activities work on contextualizing the new items. The introduction of each portion of vocabulary can start to happen through reading a text, listening to audio and video clips. This is a common practice.

However, in Arabic, “guessing” seems to be the most important of the strategies that enhance learning vocabulary in face of the huge body of word items that learners of Arabic have to deal with. This strategy is prompted by the morphological system of Arabic, syntactic forms, and lexical couplets.

There are two approaches to vocabulary learning: incidental learning and explicit instruction. First of all, through reading practice students absorb and retain vocabulary. However, the explicit instruction approach criticizes the first one for allowing only receptive comprehension of a new word and not being able to develop its active usage, which can best be achieved through explicit instruction that uses fully or partially contextualized examples. As a result, vocabulary in Arabic curriculum must be taught for better both directly and indirectly [Wahba & Taha 2006: 331–341]. These approaches we tried to translate into our course.

### Teaching of Arabic

Teaching of Arabic as a second language in the last several decades has made great strides. In the area of evaluated curricula, in the 60–70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there appeared two books that were produced for the benefit of a foreign learner of Arabic. They structured the system of teaching this language in addition to the giving the profession of Arabic teaching a sense of purpose and unity: Hans Wehr's *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* [Wehr 1979: v] and Peter Abboud (et al's) textbooks *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic* and *Intermediate Modern Standard Arabic*. In Russia one of such textbooks was *We speak Arabic: a manual for the I and II courses* by Frolova O.B. [Фролова 2001] But the language is quickly changing.

In recent years, however, these textbooks tend to be replaced by less structured and less focused texts. The reason for this tendency mainly seems to be connected to the misapplication of teaching materials of authentic origin only. Under the guise of authenticity, pieces from different sources, mostly from printed or non-printed media, are placed together in single volumes without any regard for their divergent structural levels.

Otherwise, grammar, for historical reasons, plays a greater role in teaching of Arabic than in modern European languages. It is much more structured, and complex in some basic aspects. However, the instruction in this area suffers from a few drawbacks: relying on the grammatical description of Classical Arabic for teaching of MSA structure, thanks to the old Arab grammarians. In comparison to any European language, there is hardly a book that teaches a modern European language through its medieval version. Secondly, the adaptation of grammatical categories and terminology of European languages to the teaching of Arabic, in spite of the well-known linguistic axiom that no language should be described in terms of the structure of another one. Only when there will be carried out a comprehensive statistical gathering of all grammatical features of MSA, and then produced a description of its structure on its own terms – only then we can teach true MSA.

At the beginning of the 21st century, there appeared an unexpected problem; the challenge for all teachers of Arabic outside the Arab world nowadays is to find a way to rekindle interest in learning Arabic against the current negative propaganda. As soon as political situation at the Middle East requires

us to follow the stream of quickly changing events, materials used for training the students tend to be largely drawn from the narrowly defined political type. Such narrowly focused language materials, however, can never make a basis for the deep internalizing of the culture, and no serious learning of the language can be achieved.

As a result we made an attempt to avoid sticking on politics in Arab countries studies course by choosing different topics for each 2 months period, paying attention to different country each lesson. The first module is devoted to the history of the period of Jahiliyyah (the time before Islam), Succession to Muhammad, the Islamic Conquests, Rashidun Caliphs, Umayyad dynasty, Abbasid Caliphs at Baghdad and Caliphate of Córdoba, Arabic script and general information about geography of the Middle East and North Africa (9 lessons). On the lessons of the second module students study the countries of Arabian peninsula – Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Iraq, and in addition to the topics of natural resources, political situation, economy and mass media. The third module is devoted to Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Egypt, and Somali, Djibouti with a special attention to the topics of national conflicts, military forces and armory, fleet, cuisine. And at the last, the fourth module we study Sudan, Libya, Tunis, Algeria, Morocco, West Sahara, Mauritania, Comoros, with the topics of crafts, music, theater, climate. In addition for each country at every lesson there is a summary in Arabic with main information about the country and links to different sites that may help students to deepen their knowledge.

#### Teaching and learning. Work in the classroom

Teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin. Learning is the interaction between what students know, the new information they find, and the activities they engage in as they learn. To connect a student with mentor's content it is reasonable to use cooperative learning, interactive lectures, and engaging active learning strategies, what we successfully combined at our lessons.

What is more the prior knowledge of a student is crucial if we are trying to predict the result of the studying process. Students do not come to the class as a blank slate. They have some information on the subject and use it to interpret the new one. Sometimes students cannot relate new material to what they

already know. That is clear if we speak about the learning of new language. In the majority of cases there is simply a need to memorize or learn for the test. But at the same time the teacher must feel the border when his/her student develops any real understanding of the content.

Taking into account the previous issue we come to the conclusion that the teacher needs to learn about students' experiences, preconceptions, or misconceptions by using pre-tests, and written or oral activities designed to reveal students' thinking about the topic.

As the ACSC is the program for the second course, we consider that the teacher already knows his/her students' experience and background, mainly after passing the basic courses of geography, Oriental studies and Modern Standard Arabic for the first step. So it is possible to make proper changes in the curriculum.

The course has undergone significant changes since the beginning of the academic year. We faced the problem that quite often there was a lack of time to check the homework, to hold a test or a quiz, practice new vocabulary, or discuss some related to the lesson issues. This problem was solved each time differently; either it was online checking of homework by a teacher, online tests, or transfer of a review and analysis of audio or video clips as an individual work at home, postponement of a lesson program to delve into the study of complex for students materials.

It is worth noting that we have successfully coped with the task in spite of the cancellation of several lectures due to the national holidays and the complexity of the pilot year of the course. We managed to cover the whole program materials planned and it had been learned by students sufficiently that the final test results show.

#### **Constructing the program**

The next step of making the course was to organize the information. As we have already told Oriental studies are rather complex. It is syncretic science that includes different spheres. For students to remember and use their knowledge we need to make a conceptual framework. First of all students need to learn facts, understand this information and get the ideas, and try to make a feedback in the way of discussion or a composition to develop competence in a new topic.

To make the structure of the knowledge clear in ACSC it is worth using maps, comparison

tables, illustration and photo materials, video and audio clips. People have different types of memory, so by equal combination of various types of presentation we may get better results.

Cooperation is extremely important in talking on understanding the new information. Peer-to-peer system works not only if we speak about computers. In this case group projects, discussions in the class, sharing ideas through conversation put newly got knowledge to a test. As a result there are more ways to clarify, examine and rethink ideas. This style of learning helps to develop communication skills and use the information in time, because it appears to be difficult for students.

Our students after graduation may find themselves in any part of the world, performing any profession. It is good because the perspectives they have are limited only by their own ambitions. However, it has some disadvantages. First of all, we cannot prepare them for everything and equip with all they might need. Secondly, it is often difficult for students to use what they learn in class in new contexts, for example at a workplace or common life. As a light solution of this problem we tried to use many sorts of simulations and cases, to create and construct various environments of life situations they may face in the real world. We need to help students develop these skills. This strategy is profitable for the purposes of language and culture learning.

To sum up we see that to create a proper learning process we should follow several steps. Well-structured organization of lessons, abundance of illustrations and video, audio, reading materials, discussions, simulation games would help to develop needed skills in students and construct a proper background for their proper usage.

#### **Support with the former experience**

During our work for creating ACSC we made an analysis of articles studying regional geography through language and culture-oriented linguistics, programs of closely-related courses in other universities available in open access. We draw on the expertise and experience of these courses mainly of Moscow universities, considering the methodology of this kind of courses. We also conducted research of the foreign university courses, but could not find a detailed program to make a comparison. Beyond that, the obstacle is that the course is unique so only programs that resemble its parts could be used to make a comparison and draw conclusions. Due to this fact, unfortunately,

the formulation of common criteria turned to be impossible. Therefore we try to describe the positive and negative features of these courses versus the goal we wanted to achieve by creating ACSC.

However, we may assert with confidence that the existence of regional geography courses in the main Russian and foreign universities shows that courses like this are successful, fulfill expectations, and give good results. After searching extensively through the materials available for online access, we found that in Russia there is no course like this for Arab countries. So our program is filling this gap.

#### **Analyzed courses**

##### **1) The course of Physical and economic geography of the Arab countries** [Бочарова]

The course of Physical and economic geography of the Arab countries was chosen because it seems to be the closest one to ours in terms of the information given, however, there are still many differences. As we may clearly see after reading the program the study is intended to provide future professionals with the knowledge in the field of science, expanding their understanding of the individual countries and the region as a whole, to give them a chance learn not only the peculiarities of the geography of a particular area, its' most important economic objects and their placement, but also to see the mutual relationship between economic-resource and demographic base of the studied countries, on the one hand, and human life, on the other.

The language of studying is Russian that of course limits the knowledge. If we speak about foreign countries, mainly about Eastern ones, many concepts, traditions, rules are incomprehensible for us, as for the people of other culture, as well as it is hard to explain the behavior or style of living of the members of other civilizations. Sometimes it happens so that in our native language there is no word to express the statement or a term. This leads to the conclusion that learning of the regional geography on the language of the country is more profitable.

At the end of the course the student has to be able to analyze significant social problems and processes, to practice the methods of the humanities, social, economic, historical and philological sciences in various kinds of professional and social activities related to the Eastern study. In our course we adopted

these ideas together with the necessity to teach students to present and analyze information in Arabic.

The complexity of the course under study equals to 72 academic class units and includes ten thematic sections:

- Section 1. "Understanding the region"
- Section 2. "Natural conditions"
- Section 3. «Population and demographic challenges»
- Section 4. «Political system and administrative division»
- Section 5. «General characteristics of the economy»
- Section 6. «Agricultural sector»
- Section 7. «Industry»
- Section 8. «Transport and Communication»
- Section 9. «Foreign trade»
- Section 10. «Economic-geographical areas»

This division makes us face an interesting problem of how to organize the information, or the order of lessons. The matter is that in contradistinction from the RG of Great Britain or France, we have not one but at least 23 countries to study in 36 hours. Is it better to put separate topics and observe the situation in all the countries of the studied region as Bocharova L.S did it? Or analyze at each lesson some different country, paying more attention to "the biggest ones" by dedicating those 2 lessons instead of the usual one?

There was made a compromise decision. It seemed us more reasonable to make a lesson-country organization with the combination of topics organization. What does it mean? As it has been described earlier, we choose a topic for investigation, for example, traditional cuisine, and there are several countries that would be studied in this topic – Tunis, Algeria and Morocco. So when we talk about Oman, Yemen and Saudi Arabia there would be, for instance, crafts.

Of course there are merits and demerits of this approach. Let us start from the positive sides. First of all, this option helps us to organize the information in a clear way, because it is nearly impossible to cover everything during one lesson if we have 23 countries in the schedule. Secondly, we may concentrate on the brightest and more characteristic features of the countries to draw a better pattern and provide students with good basic vocabulary.

However, we may lose some important information without paying attention to each



country at the same context. There is a way to avoid it. As a decision for this question, for each country there was made a “card” with the information summary – brief history, administrative and nature maps, photos of the leader, flag, links to the main governmental sites as well as to several universities, links to the newspapers and information sites (everything in Arabic). So this helps students to get basic information and master MSA, and at the same time leave time to acquaint themselves with the other data and practice it.

## **2) The course of Negotiation Theory and Practice (in English) [Стремовская].**

The course of Negotiation Theory and Practice by Stremovskaya A.L. has been chosen for several reasons. This course is studied in English, which is a foreign language, as well as Arabic. What is more, Oriental studies are mainly focused on the sphere of international relations, and multicultural communication. The course is dedicated to deepen and expand the theoretical background of students, improve their skills, as the potential participants in future domestic or international negotiations, to train the bilateral and multilateral talks.

The most useful aspects we may take from this course are - students’ acquaintance with the theoretical and applied aspects of the negotiation process in different social spheres, the most common strategies and tactics of negotiation, its personal and national styles. As a result of studying the course, students should absorb the spectrum of common cultural and professional competences.

## **3) The course “Comparative cultural linguistics and geography of Great Britain, USA and Russia for III – V year students” [Комова, Микоян, Анисимова, Баранова, Левашов].**

The course “Comparative cultural linguistics and geography of Great Britain, USA and Russia” is presented by the authors as a 2 years course (242 hours) with upholding the thesis and designed for students of different departments of the philological faculty. As we may see this course is twice longer than ours and implies obtaining specialization, whereas we do not set such a goal. The course is divided into themes, each by a different teacher. The themes are the following.

- Introduction to the comparative cultural studies
- History and culture of the country under study
- Political geography of the US and UK

- Cultural studies and geography of the United States
- Russian geography: from the history of art culture
- Economic and physical geography of the UK and US

These themes are developed by different specialists and at first sight have an independent nature. The most interesting and useful part of the course for us is the geography of Great Britain as its aims are similar to the goals we aspire. Practical goal of this course is to familiarize students with the history of the UK, its geography, governmental structure, history, its culture and art, as well as the history of its relations with some other countries, including Russia. Great attention is paid to various traditions and customs of the country, its modern life, especially the present social system, modern culture, the structure of British education, the media, etc. The most important strategic goal of the course is to develop students’ deep and versatile background knowledge of the country, the ability to interpret its national realities correctly, including those that belong to the sphere of non-equivalent vocabulary.

The course includes materials on behavior standards, rules of business correspondence, focusing on vocabulary. However, the main form of presentation of teaching material is a lecture, followed by illustrative audio and video materials, slides, reproductions, maps, etc. Only some specific topics at the discretion of the teacher are set for seminars supposing an independent preparation of students. Discussion and analysis of specific texts, vocabulary, and other materials are held in several practice sessions. The course is very interesting and useful; however, it does not set an aim of learning these issues through the language. But many ideas for creating ACSC were taken from this course, as you may notice.

## **4) The course of Regional geography of the Arab countries [Захарова].**

Course of the Regional geography of the Arab countries was chosen because of the similarity of thematic disciplines. The purpose of this discipline is to enhance the socio-cultural competence in the use in the studied (foreign language) with respect to the variety of its aspects, the formation of students’ skills and realistic thinking on the material of the foreign Arabic, and French acquisition on the basis of printed materials. Student should familiarize himself with the main stages of historical development, ethnic, national and cultural characteristics of the Arab countries.

Course is divided into three blocks:

- Geography and history of the Arab countries
- Population, political system, economy and culture of the Arab countries
- The Arab world

The material of the course is complex and the author provides students with a wide range of information on the topics and issues connected to the Arab world. However, unfortunately I could not find any references to the used materials in Arabic whereas there is said a lot about language training.

#### 5) The course of Linguistic and cultural studies. Arab countries [Власова 2010].

The course is based on textbooks, encyclopedias, reference books on the history, geography, regional geography and literature of the Arab countries and covers a wide range of historical, geographical, socio-economic and cultural issues. The course consists of 29 lectures, introducing the peculiarities of historical development, socio-political and economic systems in the Arab world. The author claims that her purpose is to help students studying Arabic language, Arab culture and Arab society to get an idea of the Arab nation, its prominent figures. The author starts from the position that knowledge of linguistic and cultural studies of Arab countries is not an end in itself. She hopes that it still will help readers to develop a specific life philosophy and allow solving personal, professional and social problems faster.

The list of topics:

- Introduction (geography, countries and their capitals, political leaders)
- Arab writers (Arabic literature in the Middle Ages and in modern times)
- Islam
- Qur'an
- Arab holidays (rites and customs of the Arabs, Arab cuisine)
- Arab scientists
- Arab countries. Geography. The struggle of the Arab world for independence. Social and economic problems.
- The United Nations and other non-governmental organizations (League of Arab States, Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Organization of Petroleum-Exporting Countries, Arab Maghreb Union, African Union, DN et al.)
- International and regional problems of the modern Arab world.

This course and the manual is a perfect source of information about the Arab world. It may be used as a supporting source to provide students with general information of many spheres connected to the Arab world. What is more, references presented in the book allow appealing to the source.

#### Results

Among subjects in the humanities, Oriental studies are unique in introducing students to civilizations that are completely different from the Western ones. In the majority of cases the courses presented in the basic curriculum in the universities include language, literature, history, and culture, a wide range of options from art to archaeology, and from philosophy to modern social studies. Taken as a whole, such courses give students a more or less aggregate picture of the studied region. But might not let you avoid what the British novelist and travel writer Rebecca West once described in the following manner: "Intercultural relationships are preordained to be clumsy gestures based on imperfect knowledge" [West 1928] Unlike any of the others, our course has set a goal to get a syncretic program and to beat back the challenge of the fast changing world.

Knowledge in the field of economics, geography, socio-political system, history, material and intellectual culture of the Arabic native speakers will allow students to be tolerant, to achieve success in the communication process; will assist in adaptation to the conditions in the country of the language under study. The Arabic language and Arab culture will ensure the development of intellectual and creative abilities of students, develop their thinking, memory and imagination, and form skills of independent cognitive and professional activity, self-education and self-realization.

As a result of studying the discipline the student should know:

- Arab-speaking countries and the peculiarities of the Arabic language there
- State political structure of the Arab countries
- The climatic and geographical features of the Arab countries
- Socio-economic characteristics of the modern Arab society
- The ethnic composition of the population of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, and the life of people in the country
- Specific features of the regions, especially some ethnic and dialectal Arabic in these regions.

Student should have the ability to establish adequate social and professional contacts, use the basic means of language in accordance with the ethical and moral norms of behavior, and be able to overcome the impact of national stereotypes. Student needs to learn the ways to compensate his/her knowledge of the studied language, searching for the proper information sources: dictionaries, reference books, teaching materials.

Classroom training should combine educational, practical and methodical features. Introductory lecture is designed to create a general impression of the discipline. During the classes we have to show the role and place of the course in the relevant field of knowledge to determine the value of discipline in the formation of general and professional competences.

Activities may include various types of work. Part of each class during the school year is devoted to mastering the studying knowledge. In the classroom active learning methods should be used: discussions, role-playing and simulation games. Structuring and analysis of the materials for the academic discipline are crucial: students are involved in the preparation of abstracts, transcription of audio and video files, analyzing stories on relevant topics, filling in contour maps, preparation of reports and presentations, development of a glossary of key terms and concepts, facts, personalities, dates. Independent work of students is the most important component of professional training, also due to the limited hours of classroom work. It includes training, practicing the vocabulary; work with prepared teaching materials, and independent analysis of the texts, and preparation for tests.

To consolidate the theoretical knowledge and develop skills of correct reading and dialogical speech, listening, interpreting, as well as to demonstrate the interactive tutorials and testing of students in the learning process we need to use language laboratory equipment, personal computers and multimedia projector. For successful implementation of the program language labs, equipped with furniture to the entire size of the group, as well as audio and video, and a utility room with cupboards for storage of teaching literature and teaching materials are required.

The practice of teaching also shows that regular and homework fulfilled on schedule, strict adherence to the recommendations of the teacher in order to prepare for the next lesson

and, in general, a conscious approach to the student's independent work largely determine the level of language proficiency.

Checking of the basic knowledge of students in theory within the module materials is carried out on the basis of tests and examinations. Also one of the methods of control and consolidation of the material is a creative work. It is an independent educational, scientific, practical work, the purpose of which is the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and abilities. Creative activity can include a performance or songs, create video reports, simulation television shows. As part of this work the teacher estimates presentation of the work, compliance with rules of grammar and spelling, correctness and the culture of speech, use of modern methods of data processing, possession of basic methods and means of receiving, storing and processing information. To control the current progress and intermediate certification and rating information-measuring system of assessment is used. At the end of the year, there is a test, which includes questions on selected topics in all four modules.

The course aims to prepare students to work in the conditions of deepening of business contacts in the background of globalization, socio-economic and political processes. Upon completion of the course, students should get the skills of complex regional studies research and basic knowledge of the geographical identity of the region, especially its nature, historically inherited spatial structure of the population, economy, culture and society, and their transformation at the present.

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## МЕТОДОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ АСПЕКТЫ РАЗВИТИЯ ЛИНГВОСТРАНОВЕДЧЕСКИХ КУРСОВ (НА ПРИМЕРЕ КУРСА «СТРАНОВЕДЕНИЕ. АРАБСКИЕ СТРАНЫ»)

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**Аннотация.** В статье представлен анализ нового вида учебного курса, который синтезирует методики и достижения региональных исследований и региональной географии, культурных и кросс-культурных исследований и коммуникаций, востоковедения, исследований цивилизации, изучения и преподавания языка. Курс является частью широкой программы изучения арабского языка, разработанной и введенной в НИУ ВШЭ (г. Санкт-Петербург). Спецкурс требует предварительного прохождения базового курса арабского языка. Данное исследование направлено на анализ результатов года изучения данного курса. Мы также ставим целью оценить достоинства и недостатки аспектов курса, принимая во внимание особенности учебной деятельности, знание языка, базовый словарь и сравнительный анализ нескольких подобных курсов.

**Ключевые слова:** Арабский язык, лингвострановедение, арабские страны, методика преподавания, региональная география, востоковедение.