



# Military's Shifting Needs Lead to Changes in Arabic Instruction

By Clifford Kyle Jones — *NCO Journal*

**T**he U.S. military is changing the way it teaches Arabic. Until recently, the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center had focused its efforts on teaching service members Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), but recently that focus has shifted to teaching dialects.

“Certainly, through the war years, the Iraqi dialect became critical for us, so we trained a lot of Iraqi dialects,” said Army Col. David K. Chapman, DLIFLC commandant. “But (now) we’re going to be training four full dialects of Arabic. We’ll train Iraqi, Egyptian, what we’ll call Levantine dialect — which isn’t really a dialect; it’s a number of dialects, but it’s Arabic spoken in the Levant — and Sudanese, which is another critical one.”

The Levantine dialect is spoken widely in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinian areas of Israel.

The institute, in Monterey, California, doesn’t decide which languages to teach, Chapman said. Instead, it

takes direction from each service, the National Security Agency and each of the major combatant commands, among others.

“The Army is the executive agent for all of language training for the” Department of Defense, he said. “But I get as much direction from the deputy assistant secretary of defense. From a policy perspective, he tells me which way to go.”

And the Soldiers and commanders in the field realized that when it comes to Arabic, the way to go is dialects.

“Our graduates who studied MSA, when they went to the field and were stationed in the Middle East, sometimes found some difficulties, because the language spoken in the streets is different than the MSA that they studied,” said Souzy Guirguis, an assistant professor in the institute’s Egyptian school and team lead of the Egyptian dialect rollout. “The (spoken) language was more of

a dialect, so this is why we thought that we will give them the language that they will use in reality to perform their tasks over there.”



A student listens to his professor during a Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) class at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center. The center is moving toward focusing its Arabic training on dialects rather than MSA. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

Guirguis said the new emphasis on dialects does not mean that students won't be exposed to Modern Standard Arabic, but MSA instruction will be secondary to the dialect.

“We are integrating MSA into the dialect course in a way that each of them will enhance learning the other,” he said.

Lessons are planned in such a way that dialect instruction complements learning some standard Arabic, Guirguis said. Interestingly and somewhat surprisingly, he said, students in pilot courses or who have been focused on dialect instruction in the past tend to score better on tests of their MSA knowledge.

“But this is not the reason we are doing this,” he said. “We are not after grades; we are after communication. What do our linguists need in order to communicate in the Arab countries? Whether it's Egypt, whether it's the Gulf countries, whether it's Syria or Lebanon, they need the dialect in order to communicate. But we didn't forget about reading and writing, which is mainly in MSA.”

Assistant Professor Khalda Tahir, who teaches the Sudanese courses that started in the summer at the institute, said the new

emphasis on dialects is important to the mission and the learner.

“I think this is very important if we look from the student perspective,” she said. “They need to learn the basics of MSA and the dialect. This will help them to communicate, to immerse, in any Middle East country.”

The need for speakers of common dialects has been known for a decade, and instruction at the institute is further reflecting that need, Chapman said.

“When I served in Iraq, I had about 10 interpreters who worked for me in my command, and they all spoke a different dialect — because we needed it,” he said. “Even within Iraq, we had different dialects for the different parts of the country.”

Chapman said that in general, the demand for speakers of Arabic dialects has increased significantly in recent years. As dialects have become more important, the military's need for other languages and skills have diminished. For instance, Dari, which is the Persian language derivative spoken in Afghanistan, has been discontinued at the school, although demand for the primary Persian language, Farsi, has remained strong.

“You can kind of follow the news in a way, and see what comes and goes,” Chapman said of the changes to course offerings at the institute. “What is interesting is that we didn't have a large surge in Russian requirements based on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. My amateur analysis is that we have such a strong bench of Russian speakers in the force, there was no real signal command to change that.”

Chinese has continued to be an important language for the Department of Defense. Increasingly, Spanish instruction has been added, although the Army does not train its linguists in Spanish.

“I can tell you, pound for pound, Spanish is probably the most difficult language we teach,” Chapman said. “Mostly because of the time. You only get six months,



Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center teachers dressed up in traditional clothing and brought items unique to Sudan to display as Sudanese classes kicked off at the institute this summer. (Photo courtesy of DLIFLC)



A professor leads a Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) class at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center. The center is moving toward focusing its Arabic training on dialects rather than MSA. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

and we have four dialects within Spanish. It's been so difficult that we're actually lengthening the course by 10 weeks."

The institute puts languages in four categories.

Category 1 includes the Romance languages — such as Spanish, French and Portuguese — and students get six months of instruction. Chapman said French students, like Spanish students, will probably soon be given additional time.

Category 2 includes the Germanic-oriented languages and Indonesian. Students receive nine months of instruction.

Category 3 languages include Russian, Serbian, Greek and Farsi. Instruction in these takes almost a full year.

The Category 4 languages — Arabic and its dialects, Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Pashto (which, along with Dari, is another commonly used language in Afghanistan) — take 16 months of instruction at the institute.

The DLIFLC's command sergeant major, Command Sgt. Maj. Matildo Coppi, said that no matter what language or category students study, the institute's noncom-

missioned officers serve three critical roles in helping students succeed.

Many Soldiers at the institute are Advanced Individual Training students, so they need the indoctrination into customs and courtesies, Coppi said.

And of course many of the NCOs at the institute, being linguists themselves, also assist in the instruction, serving as a bridge between the language instruction and the required military components.

"The third role is more of a mentorship role," Coppi said.

Even without expertise in a particular target language, NCOs are experts at developing Soldiers and other service members, Coppi said. At the institute, they help students adjust and implement their language training plan just like a Master Fitness Trainer helps Soldiers reach their fitness goals, Coppi said. So regardless of how requirements change or which languages come in and out of vogue at the institute, Coppi says its NCOs are ready to help Soldiers achieve proficiency and provide commanders with Soldiers who can meet the needs of any mission. ■

**NCO JOURNAL**

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

