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# Integrating ‘FORTE’ to Enhance Speaking Confidence in the Arabic Classroom

Don Gomez

*This paper was completed and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master Teacher Program, a 2-year faculty professional development program conducted by the Center for Teaching Excellence, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 2021.*

## **Abstract**

*This research project sought to enhance students’ ability to “perform” in a second language (SL) through a modification to course instruction through an emphasis on ‘FORTE’ (Family, Occupation, Recreation, Travel, Education). This study was conducted over the Spring semester of 2021 across two classroom sections of LA204 - Basic Arabic II (n=24). The objective of this research was to determine the extent to which modifications to course instruction methods affect students’ level of confidence in speaking Arabic as measured by survey responses, instructor observation, and verbal feedback. Additionally, the research sought to determine if ability to perform in a second language demonstrated an increased interest in pursuing additional language study. Over the course of the semester, students were introduced to specific material relating to FORTE and practiced this material during the ‘warm-up’ period of the class (first 10 to 15 minutes). While the findings show significant increase in reported confidence in student speaking ability, more research is required to determine what effect this may have on enthusiasm for continued Arabic study.*

## **Background**

Acquisition of a category IV foreign language is a challenging ordeal.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Arabic, it is not uncommon to spend the first year of language study focused solely on the alphabet, pronunciation of uncommon sounds, simple grammar, and basic greetings.<sup>2</sup> The inability to “perform” in a second language (SL) may discourage confidence and enthusiasm in students attempting to acquire a challenging language. As a college student and a non-language major who learned Arabic over the course of many years at various institutions, I recall vividly the frustration of spending hours in the Arabic classroom studying arcane elements of grammar but being incapable of speaking confidently at length on any topic.<sup>3</sup> Many Arabic language programs focus on language fundamentals for the first year (or more) in order to establish a solid base to set a path for future learning.

In 2016, I participated in the Special Operations Language Training program (SOLT) for Arabic as a part of the Psychological Operations Qualification Course (POQC). This course is part of the United States John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (USAJFKSWCS) and is

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<sup>1</sup> The US State Department categorized category IV languages as those languages which are “exceptionally difficult for native English speakers.” These include, but are not limited to, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/m/fsi/sls/orgoverview/languages/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Many Arabic language programs are modelled after traditional Arabic instruction in the Middle East where proficiency in a spoken dialect has already been mastered. For the English-speaking learner of Arabic, this model of learning which focuses almost primarily on the textual modes of language acquisition may not be appropriate.

<sup>3</sup> Across four Arabic language programs at four different universities, speaking was the modality exercised the least.

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designed to take soldiers who have no language training and train them to score a 1+ on the Oral Proficiency Interview in six months.<sup>4</sup> In the case of category IV languages like Arabic and Chinese, this necessitates a focus on speaking proficiency, since it is the modality that will be assessed.

To maximize success on the OPI, USAJFKSWCS trains students along a five subject continuum using the mnemonic 'FORTE.' This stands for (f)amily, (o)ccupation, (r)ecreation, (t)ravel, and (e)ducation. Classes are designed to build the grammatical skills and vocabulary necessary to discuss those five topics at length. Mastery of these topics has a proven track record of training special operations soldiers to attain at least a 1 "plus" (1+) on the OPI at scale. Students who are able to master FORTE with confidence receive additional instruction with an emphasis on more abstract topics to improve their chances of attaining higher scores on the OPI. Daily classes often feature a period of students answering basic questions on FORTE at length. Over time, students are able to speak at length on FORTE and provide a basic biography of themselves.<sup>5</sup>

As a first-year instructor at West Point and a participant in the Master Teacher Program, I found myself intrigued with the idea of "small ball" teaching. This is the concept as outlined in James Lang's *Small Teaching* that by paring down instruction to smaller activities, instructors can more effectively focus attention and students can build greater understanding, as opposed to pure lecturing. Lang identifies three ways to integrate small teaching. These are: 1) brief classroom activities (5-10 minutes), 2) one-time interventions in a course, and 3) small modification to course design or communication with students.<sup>6</sup>

All Cadets attending West Point must successfully take at least one year of language instruction. Which language a Cadet will take is determined by two factors; their personal preference and their ability (based on the results of a Defense Language Aptitude Battery - DLAB). The majority of Cadets enrolled in first-year language instruction will terminate their language learning at West Point at the completion of their second course (LX204).

Through integrating SOLT methodology (FORTE) and "small ball" teaching techniques, I sought to determine what effect improvements in speaking ability might increase confidence in the language and enhanced enthusiasm for continued study. Most importantly, administering the research project served as a means to put new teaching methods into practice and enhance my own teaching ability, ultimately enriching the education of future students.

## Design and Methodology

Before the start of the research project, students were provided a survey which allowed for the collection of baseline information. Subsequent surveys included the same questions and were administered three times during the semester (beginning, medial, final). Participants who

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<sup>4</sup> The Basic Special Operations Language Training provides instruction in three basic language skills: Speaking/Listening/Reading (limited). Soldiers must achieve a minimum Interagency Language Roundtable of 1+/1+ in listening and speaking as measured by the two-skill Oral Proficiency Interview. [https://www.soc.mil/SWCS/\\_pdf/SWCS\\_FY21\\_AcademicHandbook\\_web.pdf](https://www.soc.mil/SWCS/_pdf/SWCS_FY21_AcademicHandbook_web.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> This information is derived from personal experience as a student in SOLT training.

<sup>6</sup> See Lang, pg. 7.

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completed the surveys did not have their personal information collected. Notes were collected during instruction while administering FORTE practice to assist in recording observations. These observations were used to provide anecdotal assessments of student performance in the classroom over the course of the research project. Observations were of a general nature and were not tied to individuals (ie; no names or personal information was written down during observations). During informal conversations, the instructor asked questions of a general nature regarding student confidence and enthusiasm for learning Arabic and their experience with the FORTE method. This information was de-personalized in the research findings and used to provide relevant commentary, where appropriate in this project, on the efficacy of the FORTE method.

Before beginning any instruction, students were informed about the purpose and design of the research project, to include subject matter included in the background of this paper (. This included a history of the instructor’s Arabic language journey, an explanation of special operations language training, the OPI, and the FORTE method of language instruction. Students were also informed about the modification of the classroom instruction. Instead of conducting a classic warm-up period consisting of a short question and answer session based on the current material, students would practice elements of FORTE.<sup>7</sup>

Initial Schedule	
Personal Details	1-12 February 2021 (Survey 1)
Family	15-26 February
Occupation	1-12 March
Recreation	15-26 March (Survey 2)
Travel	29 March - 9 April
Education	12-23 April
Refinement	26 April - 7 May (Survey 3)

Each element of FORTE would be scheduled for a two-week period. That is, ‘family’ would be practiced for two weeks before moving on to ‘occupation,’ and then ‘recreation,’ and so on. Modifications were made to this schedule based on changes to the lesson plan due to holidays, study days, etc. Additionally, if students demonstrated mastery of a topic (as a class), the next topic would be introduced sooner.

Each element of FORTE was introduced with a PowerPoint slide that included the title of the element (family, for example), the trigger question in a red font in Arabic (“*tell me about your family*”), the narrative in English, the narrative in Arabic, and any additional information or new vocabulary necessary for the element. This PowerPoint slide would be present for students in the classroom during the warm-up period. The instruction would begin with the instructor introducing the element and trigger question, explaining the structure of the response, and then modeling the response in Arabic. Afterwards, students would pair off with one another and begin working on the element, with one student asking the trigger question and the other answering before reversing roles. This would transpire for 7-10 minutes. Afterwards, the instructor would ask a sample of students (2-4) the trigger question to hear the response, making corrections as necessary. At the completion of the exercise, the regular day’s lesson would begin.

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<sup>7</sup> This satisfied two of Lang’s requirements for “small teaching” - 10-15 minute activity and modification to the course design.

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Figure 1. Sample FORTE slides used during daily practice

While the original intent was to introduce each subject in order of FORTE, it was apparent that certain elements were a better match to the classroom instruction and would reinforce holistic learning. This happened once during the semester, where ‘recreation’ was practiced instead of ‘occupation,’ which was trained afterwards. Additionally, due to changes in the academic calendar, the ‘travel’ element was not fully trained (for a full two-week period). However, the majority of students demonstrated proficiency in that element despite the shortened practice time.

In the last two to three days of training an element, students would be asked (by the instructor) the trigger questions for previous elements. For example, during the end of the ‘recreation’ period, a student would be asked to discuss ‘family’ ensuring that material learned in previous sections was reinforced.

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*“This program has really helped me develop confidence in my speaking and I feel that it is useful to describe the basic aspects of your personal life.”*

*-Anonymous student, Survey #3 feedback*

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## Findings

The surveys served as the primary means for collecting data in this research project.<sup>8</sup> The surveys were short and took most students approximately one minute and thirty seconds to complete.<sup>9</sup> With the exception of the final question concerning enthusiasm, all questions used a Likert scale to gather data.

Over the course of three surveys, students reported a significant increase in self-reported confidence in their ability to speak across all five subject areas. Additionally, student confidence in their ability to speak at length increased over the three surveys. There was not a significant change in students reporting a likelihood to continue Arabic study after the end of this semester.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix A for a full list of survey questions.

<sup>9</sup> Microsoft Forms was used for all three surveys which provides the average time to complete.

<sup>10</sup> Across the two sections, there were two students who were declared Arabic Majors which requires additional Arabic language training past LA204, and as such, there should have been at least two students who would always indicate a high likelihood of continuing Arabic study past LA204.

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The most significant findings from the survey data concerns reported student confidence in their ability in the speaking modality in general and their ability to speak at various lengths of time. In regards to confidence in the speaking modality, 45.5% of students (#10.92) reported confidence in their speaking ability in Survey #1.<sup>11</sup> This jumped to 87.5% of students (#21) in Survey #2.

In regards to confidence in speaking ability as it relates to speaking duration, 18.1% of students (#4.32) reported confidence in their ability to speak at length for 1 to 2 minutes in Arabic in Survey #1. This increased to 86.4% (#20.64) by Survey #3.<sup>12</sup>

While most students demonstrated marked improvement in their ability to speak in each modality over the course of the semester, it was clear that students who were already high-achievers tended to perform better in FORTE tasks.<sup>13</sup>

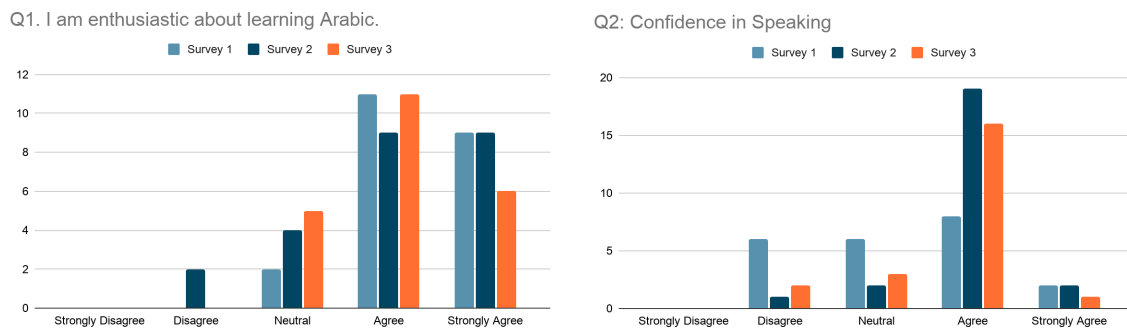


Figure 2 (left): Survey data on reported enthusiasm in learning Arabic across three surveys  
 Figure 3 (right): Survey data on reported confidence in the ‘Speaking’ modality across three surveys. Note the increase in “Agrees” in Survey #2



Figure 4: Survey data on reported confidence on ability to speak in Arabic uninterrupted for various periods of time.  
 Note the increase in confidence in ability to speak 1minute to 2 minutes on survey #2  
 Left - Survey #1 / Right - Survey #3

During one-on-one conversations with students as part of their oral exams, students were asked a general question regarding feedback on the course. Numerous students emphasized that they

<sup>11</sup> This confidence is measured by the sum of students who selected “Agree” or “Strongly Agree.”  
<sup>12</sup> This confidence is measured by the sum of students who selected “Agree” or “Strongly Agree.”  
<sup>13</sup> Instructors observation: “High-achievers” is defined as those students who are achieving high grades in the course, in this case “A” and “A+.”

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enjoyed the speaking portion of the class and it was their favorite part of learning Arabic.

## Conclusion

It comes as no surprise that students reported increased confidence in their ability to speak at length on topics within the FORTE continuum throughout the research project. The addition of FORTE necessitated an increased emphasis on speaking that is not normally present in year-one Arabic courses. One of the primary objectives of this project was to determine if there is a linkage between student confidence in performing in L2 and their motivation to pursue continued Arabic language study. While there was a slight increase (+1 promoter) over the course of the three surveys, there is not enough data to state that increases in confidence result in increased enthusiasm for future study.<sup>14</sup>

Significant limitations to this research included the small sample size, the lack of a control group, and the inability to measure over a longer period of time. For many students who participated in this research project, this will be the last Arabic class they take at West Point.

Future research in this area would benefit from a larger sample size and a control group. Second-semester Arabic students are likely the best audience for this project due to the fact that they have already learned the basics of Arabic (simple greetings, the alphabet, basic grammar) and the material contained in FORTE pairs favorably with second semester instruction. If attempted with intermediate or advanced Arabic students, I would recommend integrating proficiency interviews as well (official or unofficial) which would offer an objective datapoint beyond reported confidence and enthusiasm. Additionally, the ability to track students over much longer periods of time (post-graduation) would help determine if reported enthusiasm leads to eventual continued language instruction. There may be a role for the *Center for Languages, Cultures, & Regional Studies* housed within the Department of Foreign Language at West Point to assist in future research.<sup>15</sup>

While not measured formally as part of the research project, the design and execution of this research project served as a means of enhancing the skills, confidence, and enthusiasm of the instructor. The daily interaction with students on this project and the iterative feedback allowed for experimentation and the rapid development of important skills for any instructor, but especially for language. It would be interesting for future research to include data on changes in instructor behavior based on the trajectory of the FORTE training.

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<sup>14</sup> The question regarding enthusiasm on the survey used the "net promoter score" to measure enthusiasm. This method calculates "promoters" versus "detractors." While this method is better suited to the commercial sector in determining brand loyalty, it was one of the better tools available in the survey tools and satisfied the limited needs of this research.

<sup>15</sup> The Center for Languages, Cultures, & Regional Studies collects and analyzes longitudinal data for DFL Majors.

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## Appendix A - Survey Questions

### Questions for MTP Research Survey

Please respond the following prompts (all use 1-5 Likert Scale):

1 - Strongly disagree

2 - Disagree

3 - Neutral

4 - Agree

5 - Strongly agree

1. I am enthusiastic about learning Arabic.
2. I am confident in my ability to perform in the following modalities in Arabic
  - a) Writing
  - b) Reading
  - c) Listening
  - d) Speaking
3. I am confident in my ability to discuss the following topics in Arabic
  - a) Family (family members, where they live, what they do for a living, basic personal qualities)
  - b) Occupation (your current profession, where you work/study, what you do on a daily basis)
  - c) Recreation (hobbies, skills, sports, etc.)
  - d) Travel (describe places you have been, places you go, basic directions)
  - e) Education (discuss the level of your education, degrees, subjects studied, specializations)
4. I am confident in my ability to speak in Arabic uninterrupted for the following time periods:
  - a. <30 seconds
  - b. 30 seconds to 1 min
  - c. 1 min to 2 min
  - d. 2 min to 3 min
  - e. >3 mins
5. I am likely to continue studying Arabic at some time in the future.