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**Written and Spoken Arabic in Syria:  
towards the development of teaching Arabic as a foreign language  
at the Higher Language Institute of Damascus**

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**Abstract**

Standard Arabic is actually the language of writing. The speeches made in the media and in some TV series are, in most cases, a literal restatement of visual coding of the language (text written in standard Arabic) in auditory coding (reading aloud the written text). Similarly, everyday Arabic does not have the same coding as Arabic that exists in the media, in books and in Arabic language courses. This gives the impression that the current teaching content is not suitable for a usage outside the language classroom.

This paper deals with the problem of building the lexical content of textbooks of teaching Arabic as a foreign language of Higher Language Institute of Damascus (Syria). A content that does not withdraw from standard norms (focus on the adaptation of a classic or modern standard Arabic), but seeks to be as close as possible to the daily practice of language that is very rich in dialect. We study the spoken language in Syria represented in 30 Syrian TV videos. The study proves that about 60% of its lexical components belongs to standard Arabic. This analysis focuses on finding the crossing points in standard and spoken Arabic to build a route map that allows the learner an easy passage from what he learns in the Arabic language classroom to Arabic that is really practiced in everyday communications. It provides some solutions to reduce the gap between these two usages of Arabic.

**Keywords:**

Arabic, CEFR, corpus analysis, foreign language, language teaching, learning, lexical competence, Literary Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, Standard Arabic, Syrian dialect, textbook analysis.

### Transliteration of the Arabic alphabet

Arabic letter	Symbol	Arabic letter	Symbol	Arabic letter	Symbol	Arabic letter	Symbol
ء	'	د	d	ض	ḍ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	ḏ	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ẓ	م	m
ث	ṯ	ز	z	ع	'	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	ġ	ه	h
ح	ḥ	ش	š	ف	f	و	w
خ	ḫ	ص	ṣ	ق	q	ي	y

Short vowels		Long vowels	
اَ	a	اِ	ā
اُ	u	اِي	ū
اِ	i	اِي	ī

#### 1. Introduction

The language provided and used in the class of Arabic language is notably different from that practiced by people outside the classroom. The language spoken in these two environments is not the same. In the classroom, we normally find Standard Arabic (classical or modern) while there are outside of this environment more than ten "constituent glosses" of this language system (Dichy 1994: 28-30). The simultaneous presence of several varieties of Arabic reduces, for the learner, the opportunity to stay in touch with the formal literary lexicon and consequently poses a risk to lose it.

Different Arabic speakers rarely use Standard Arabic to communicate between themselves. They prefer to use their dialects in which common lexical elements are included with modern Standard Arabic (Dichy, 2007, 2010). This type of Arabic is sometimes distinctly different from one country to another. A Syrian speaker and a Lebanese or a Jordanian speaker can understand each other if both speak in their own dialect because they are from neighbouring language cultures. However, a Syrian and a Moroccan can't communicate easily through their dialects. Here, Standard Arabic is indispensable.

The choice between the Standard and any of the other Arabic "glosses" will mainly depend on why the learner wants to learn the language. If the reason is to settle in a particular country or to communicate with people of a certain culture, learning colloquial Arabic may be more appropriate because it facilitates everyday communication. However, if we can offer to the learner a Standard Arabic lexicon which is closer to every day Arabic, this will give him more flexibility to integrate with various communication situations.

## 2. The Corpus of *Marāyā 2013*

The revision and the development of the lexical content in Arabic textbooks of Higher Language Institute of Damascus require researching rich natural or near to natural resources of Arabic lexicon. The linguistic analysis of them is required to determine the effectiveness of the proposed lexicon. The textbooks are usually based on textual documents, but the enrichment of their content requires also the analysis of spoken performances that are difficult to select in case of teaching Arabic language. It was necessary then to develop a uniform oral corpus to observe, describe and interpret linguistic and discursive configurations, close to the daily language. Our choice fell so on the last season of the TV series *Marāyā 2013*, which has been until today a very popular television series in Syria and in many countries of the Arab world since 1982.

The corpus of *Marāyā 2013* is made up of thirty video files representing all of the episodes of the series defused in 2013 on the Algerian channel *Aš-šurūq TV*. The language of the episodes is mainly the dialect of Damascus. However, some dialects of other regions can appear according to the characters. The words of the characters were transcribed into text format and annotated using the tool ELAN (EUDICO Linguistic Annotator).

The analysis of the corpus is implemented in two steps:

- statistical and descriptive analysis: the objective of this analysis is to determine the different types of speech in the Syrian dialect found in the episodes of *Marāyā*;
- linguistic analysis: aims to distribute into groups the existing lexical items. A semantic and morphological study will then be applied to each of these groups individually.

### 2.1. Lexical Categories of The Corpus of *Marāyā 2013*

The dialect of Damascus, represented by most of the episodes of *Marāyā 2013* is a regional dialect according to the classification proposed by Dichy (1994). It is composed mainly of lexical items that come directly from the dictionary of Standard Arabic, classical or modern, or that are derived from these. Several varieties of Arabic can be distinguished in the episodes. This phenomenon is recognized in most Arabic publicized speeches. The transition from one variety to another in the words of the same speaker during the same discourse depends on the lexical and socio-pragmatic pressures that influence the communication skill of the speaker (Dichy, 2010). In a phrase like « أهلين و كول هوا، شو جايب معك؟<sup>1</sup> », a simple look at each component of this construction is enough to recall their origins belonging to Standard Arabic.

<sup>1</sup> *Marāyā 2013* (episode 1, 00:53).

To go further in this observation, we chose the first 2100 most repeated elements in the corpus of *Marāyā 2013*. These items were distributed, according to their membership or distance of standard Arabic, in four lexical categories: “literary lexicon”, “quasi-literary lexicon”, “close to literary lexicon” and “dialectal lexicon”. Sorting the different elements of both the “quasi-literary lexicon” and “close literary lexicon,” is based mainly on the degree of morphological changes to the original form belonging to the standard Arabic. This change is measured at two levels:

- Changes in short vowels:
  - replace a vowel by another: « أَنْتَ : 'anta : you » ⇨ « اِنْتِ : 'inta : you » ;
  - extend a vowel: « اِحْكِ : ihki : talk ! » ⇨ « اِحْكِي : ihki : talk ! », (conjugated in both cases to the imperative of the second person, masculine, singular) ;
  - delete a vowel: « يَصِيرُ : yaṣīru : became » ⇨ « يُصِير : yṣīr : became » ;
- changes in letters and long vowels:
  - replace a letter with another: « أَعْرِف : 'a'rif : I know » ⇨ « بَعْرِف : ba'rif : I know » ;
  - add a letter: « نَكْتُب : naktub : we write » ⇨ « مَنكُتُب : mnuktub : we write », (here, there is also a change of a short vowel after the added letter : na ⇨ nu) ;
  - add a long vowel: « اِطْلَعْ : iṭla' : come up ! » ⇨ « اِطْلَاع : iṭlā' : come up ! », (conjugated in both cases to the imperative of the second person, masculine, singular) ;
  - delete a letter: « هَوَاء : hawā' : air » ⇨ « هَوَا : hawā : air » ;
  - change the order of letters: « زَوْجِي : zawjī : my husband » ⇨ « جُوزِي : juwzī : my husband » ;
  - change the pronunciation of a letter: « قَرِيب : qarīb : close to » ⇨ « أَرِيب : 'arīb : close to ».

About that last comment (change the pronunciation), we found seven letters of Standard Arabic that can be pronounced differently in the regional dialect of Damascus. The following table shows, with examples, how to pronounce these letters in different contexts.

**Abbreviations:**

SA: Standard Arabic

L: letter in Arabic script

RdD: Regional dialect of Damascus

T: Transliteration of the Arabic letter

Tra: Translation of the example in English

Table 1

*Arabic letters pronounced differently in RdD*

SA letter		Pronunciation in RdD		Example	Original word
L	T	L	T	Word : T : Tra	Word : T
ث	t	ث	t̄	مُتَالِث : <i>Mutallat</i> : triangle	مُتَالِث : <i>Mutallat</i>
		ت	t	مِثْل : <i>mitil</i> : like	مِثْل : <i>mitil</i>
		س	s	مَسَالًا : <i>masalan</i> : for example	مَسَالًا : <i>maṭalan</i>
ذ	d	ذ	d̄	ذِئْب : <i>di'b</i> : wolf	ذِئْب : <i>di'b</i>
		ز	z	إِزْن : <i>'izin</i> : permission	إِذْن : <i>'idn</i>
		د	d	إِذِن : <i>'idin</i> : hear	أُذِن : <i>'udun</i>
ص	s̄	ص	s̄	صَحِيح : <i>ṣahīh</i> : true	صَحِيح : <i>ṣahīh</i>
		س	s	سَدِّقْنِي : <i>saddi'nī</i> : believe me !	سَدِّقْنِي : <i>ṣaddiqnī</i>
ض	d̄	ض	d̄	مَرِيض : <i>marīd</i> : ill	مَرِيض : <i>marīd</i>
		ز	z	مَرَبُوط : <i>mazbūt</i> : absolutely	مَضْبُوط : <i>maḍbūṭ</i>
ظ	z	ظ	z̄	مُظَاهَرَة : <i>muẓāharah</i> : demonstration	مُظَاهَرَة : <i>muẓāharah</i>
		ض	d̄	ضَهْر : <i>ḍahr</i> : back	ظَهْر : <i>ẓahr</i>
		ز	z	غَلِيْظ : <i>galīz</i> : heavy / annoying	غَلِيْظ : <i>galīz</i>
ق	q	ق	q	حَدِيْقَة : <i>ḥadiqah</i> : garden / park	حَدِيْقَة : <i>ḥadiqah</i>
		أ	'	أَدِيْم : <i>'adīm</i> : ancient	قَدِيْم : <i>qadīm</i>
		/	g	أَبُو قَاسِم : <i>'abū gāsim</i> : the father of Gāsim	أَبُو قَاسِم : <i>'abū gāsim</i>

We divided also the lexical content of each of the four lexical categories created earlier into five groups: 1) names, 2) verbs, 3) adjectives, 4) tools, and 5) another lexicon.

Data analysis was conducted in two directions: the first was for showing the volume of lexical groups (nouns, verbs, adjectives, tools and another lexicon) composing each of the categories studied. The second reading was to show how much lexical components belonging or not to different lexical categories.

## 2.2. Horizontal Reading of Data

A cross-sectional look at the results of the classification of lexical items in these four categories shows that:

- for the first three classification groups (nouns, verbs and adjectives), we notice a similar ranking for each of the four lexical categories: the group of nouns is always the biggest one, followed by the group of verbs and then, the group of adjectives;
- the ratio of adjectival group remains low in all categories;
- for the first three lexical categories, far away from literary Arabic, the proportion of nominal components significantly reduced in favour of the verbal components. This shows that names related to literary Arabic become fewer unlike verbs that become more numerous;
- tools take up constantly an important place in all three categories and become majority in the dialectal lexicon;
- the elements belonging to the group "others" are an average of 10% of the components of the last three categories, and are virtually non-existent in the literary lexicon.

Table 2

*Proportions of the components of the four lexical categories according to groups*

<b>Horizontal reading</b>	Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives	Tools	another	TOTAL
Literary lexicon	45%	13%	6%	35%	1%	100%
Quasi-literary lexicon	41%	16%	3%	30%	10%	100%
Close to literary lexicon	29%	22%	8%	33%	8%	100%
Dialectal lexicon	9%	5%	2%	72%	12%	100%

## 2.3. Vertical Reading of Data

The results of the categorization of lexical elements of the five groups studied show:

- for the four first groups: « nouns », « verbs », « adjectives » and « tools », the lexicon belongs to the category « literary lexicon » occupy the biggest place, compared to the lexicon of the others categories. The ratio of this lexicon is bigger in the groups « nouns » and « adjectives », of (74%) for both of them. It becomes more and more little in the groups « verbs »: (62%), and « tools »: (55%). This lexicon is the weakest one in the group « another lexicon » where it appears with a ratio of (10%);

- the « quasi-literary lexicon » comes in second position in the groups: « nouns », « verbs », « adjectives » and « another lexicon », and in third position in the group « tools »;
- the « close to literary lexicon » occupies the second place in the group « adjectives », with a ratio equivalent to that of the category « quasi-literary lexicon » in this same group, with a proportion of (10%) for both of them. It occupies the third position in the groups: « nouns », « verbs », « divers » and « tools », and the last position in the group « tools »;
- finally, the « dialectal lexicon » comes in the last position in the groups: « nouns », « verbs » and « adjectives ». It occupies the second place in the group « tools », and becomes in first position in the group « another lexicon ».

Tableau 3

*Proportions of lexical components of the five groups according to categories*

<b>Vertical reading</b>	Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives	Tools	another
Literary lexicon	74%	62%	74%	55%	10%
Quasi-literary lexicon	18%	21%	10%	13%	36%
Close to literary lexicon	5%	11%	10%	5%	11%
Dialectal lexicon	3%	6%	6%	27%	43%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

These results assume the hypothesis that learning « nouns », « verbs », « adjectives » and « tools », that belong at the same time to literary Arabic and to Syrian dialect (of Damascus), may help to comprehend a majority of dialectal communication of Damascus. Moreover, for these four groups, knowing how to link the "quasi-literary lexicon" and the "close to literary lexicon" to their literary origins may also increase this capacity to understanding at a higher level.

#### **2.4. Global Reading of Data**

This reading is also achieved, as detailed reading data in two directions: vertical (for the entire analysed lexicon, classified according to categories), and horizontal (for all of this lexicon, but classified this time according to the groups).

The vertical global reading of data led to the following results:

- the « literary lexicon » composes (62%) of the analysed corpus;
- the « quasi-literary lexicon » is present with a low percentage of (17%);
- the « close to literary lexicon » is also lower and composes only 6% of the total;



- and finally, the « dialectal lexicon » appears close by its quantity to « quasi-literary lexicon », and composes 15% of the total analysed lexicon.

However, the horizontal global reading of the data shows more clearly the nature of the most common lexical elements in *Marāyā 2013* and their distribution in the corpus. This reading shows that:

- the « tools » are the lexical elements which are the most widespread throughout the lexicon studied. They are present at a rate of 40%;
- the nominal lexicon occupies the second place with a rate of (38%);
- verbal lexicon comes third with a rate of 13% only;
- the "adjectives" are even fewer than the "verbs" and represent 5% of the corpus;
- and finally, the lexicon belonging to the group "another lexicon" is present with a rate of 4% and occupies; therefore, the last place.

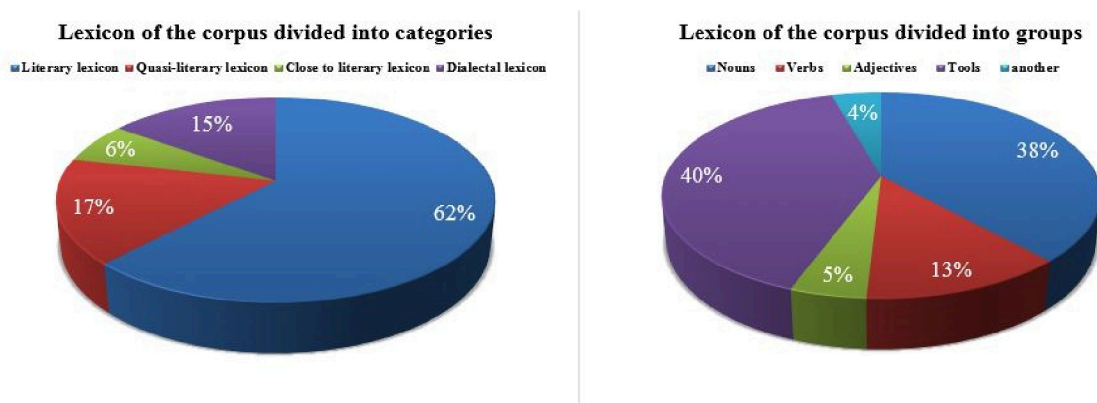


Figure 1 Lexicon of the corpus divided into categories and groups

### 3. Morphological and Semantic Analysis of Lexical Elements of The Corpus of *Marāyā 2013*

By this analysis, we proceed to examine the degrees of morphological and semantic slippage of literary lexical units that are present in every day Arabic in Syria, represented by *Marāyā 2013*. Morphological analysis is devoted to possible changes of a lexical element in its simple and / or composed format, out of context. Conversely, semantic analysis considers the context in which the lexical item is used.

Thus, we distinguish:

- 1- lexical items which have the same meaning and the same form in dialect and in literary Arabic (أخي : 'ḥī : my brother) ;
- 2- lexical items that have undergone slight changes between the literary and dialectal Arabic (letters and / or vowels), but maintain the same meaning (كثير / كَثِير : kaṭīr/ ktīr : a lot) ;
- 3- lexical items which have the same shape in literary Arabic and in dialect but whose meaning is different between the two registers (بكرة : bukraḥ : time just before sunrise « in literary Arabic » / tomorrow « in Syrian dialect »).

We also distinguish, in collocations and idioms:

- 1- constructions that have the same components in literary Arabic and in dialect, and that give the same meaning (إن شاء الله : 'in šā'a'a Allāh : if God wants) ;
- 2- constructions of lexical items belonging to literary Arabic but are working only in a colloquial usage (أمر عيونك : 'amr 'yūnak : at your service;
- 3- dialectal constructs containing lexical items related to literary Arabic, maintaining the same meaning as the original literary construction (جِدْ لِلْمِئَةِ أَيْلٍ □ : t'idd lal-miyyih 'bil mā... : count to one hundred before « doing something »), the equivalent literal expression is (جِدْ لِلْمِئَةِ قَبْلَ أَنْ... □ ta'uddu lil-mi'ah qabla 'an...);
- 4- constructs containing lexical items related to literary Arabic but that exist and have a meaning only in dialect (سَتَوَطِّي حَيْطِي □ tistawṭī ḥiyṭī).

This comparative approach allows to identify morphological, transformational, categorical and interpretive criteria of Arabic lexicon. It also promotes the acquisition of formal and structural knowledge and combinatorial expertise dating back the level of lexical and communication skills of the learner.

Activities of morphological recognition can then be developed to train learners to make the link between these two types of lexicon.

If we take, for example, the following sentence which is an extract from a phone conversation in *Marāyā 2013* (episode 1, 14:03):

1) 'a'fīnī jozī, biddī 'aḥkī ma'ū.	Pass me my husband, I want to talk to him!	1) أعطيني جوزي، بدّي أحكي مغور.
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In literary Arabic, several scenarios can give the same meaning. Among which, the following two may be mentioned:

2) 'a'ṭinī zawjī, 'urīdu 'an 'ukalimahu/ 'atakallama ma'ahu.	(2) أعطني زوجي، أريد أن أكلمه/كلم معه.
3) 'a'ṭinī zawjī, 'urīdu 'an 'atahaddata 'ilayhi/ ma'ahu.	(3) أعطني زوجي، أريد أن أحدث إليه/معه.

Between the sentence 1 and sentences 2 and 3 there is a similar lexicon:

'a'ṭinī : أعطني ⇔ 'a'ṭinī : أعطيني  
 zawjī : زوجي ⇔ jozī : جوزي  
 ma'ahu : معه ⇔ ma'ū : معو

These three words in the dialect of Damascus have the same meaning as the three corresponding words in literary Arabic. The first ('a'ṭinī : أعطني), composed of the verb (أعطى : 'a'ṭā) and the object (ني : nī), is a form of the word slipped morphologically (أعطني : 'a'ṭinī) by the extension of the vowel (i) on the third letter of the word, or keeping, in dialect, the letter (ي: ī) the root of the verb while it should be deleted in the case of literary Arabic.

The second word (juzī : جوزي), consisting of the name (جوز : joz : husband) and the pronoun (ي : ī : equivalent to the possessive adjective "my"), is a reformulation of (زوجي : zawjī) by reversing the first three letters of the word (which is a very rare phenomenon in Syrian dialect). The vowel (a) of the first litter in the literary word is replaced by the vowel (u) in the word in dialect.

The third word (ma'ū : معو) composed of the preposition (مع : ma') and the pronoun (و : ū : from the third person, masculine, singular) is a reformulation of the word (معه : ma'ahu) by replacing the pronoun (هـ : hu) of literary Arabic, after slipping its short vowel (u) on the last letter of the word:

ma'ahu : معه ⇔ ma'uh : معه ⇔ ma'ū : معو

The analysis of these three words shows that a learner can understand half of the sentence 1 if he learns one of the two sentences 2 and 3. To guess the meaning of the second half, it is necessary to look in literary Arabic for another equivalent of (بدي أحكي : biddī 'ahkī). The second component of this construction (أحكي : 'ahkī) exists already in literary Arabic. It is a verb equivalent to (كلم : 'atakallam, أحدث : 'atahaddat). But (أحكي : 'ahkī) is more used in dialect with the meaning of « talk », while in literary Arabic it means frequently « recount ».

As for the word (بدي : biddī : I want), it comes from the origin (بيدّي : bi-widdī) composed of the preposition (بي : bi) attached to the noun (ودّ : widd : desire) and to the

pronoun (ي : ī). The first letter of the noun is always deleted in Syrian dialect. In other Arabic dialects, (in Saudi Arabia for example) the people say (وَدِّي : *widdī* : I want) by removing the preposition and keeping the first letter of the name.

The word (بِدِّي : *biddī*) in dialect gives, so, a verbal meaning « I want » while it has, in literary Arabic, a nominal meaning « my desire ». The verb equivalent to the dialectal meaning exists in literary Arabic (أُودُّ : *'awaddu* : I want / I desire). Understanding the sentence 1 of Syrian dialect through literary Arabic is possible if we provide in the textbooks phrases such as:

4) 'a'ṭinī zawjī, 'waddu 'an 'uḥākīhi/ 'aḥkī ma'ahu.	(4) أعطني زوجي، أودُّ أن أحكيه/ أحكي معه.
5) 'a'ṭinī zawjī, biwiddī 'an 'uḥākīhi/ 'aḥkī ma'ahu.	(5) أعطني زوجي، بوَدِّي أن أحكيه/ أحكي معه.

By this practice, acquired vocabulary can best help the learner to communicate with native speakers and understand them outside the classroom. It is also necessary to highlight some grammatical differences between literary Arabic and the targeted dialect like deleting in dialect the grammatical tool (أن : 'an : that) which separates, in literary Arabic, two verbs the first is often a verb of desire or obligation (يَجِبُ أن : *yajibu 'an* : it is necessary that, أريدُ أن : *'urīdu 'an* : I want).

#### 4. Conclusion

Language teaching is now developing theories and very powerful educational tools to facilitate the learning task and motivate learners to improve their skills. The language habits change continuously. Learner needs change too. This is why it is always necessary to review and update the theoretical methods and practices in the educational program to refine the pedagogy and the content of the textbooks. Because learning is largely based on vocabulary knowledge, four key points must always be taken into consideration during the preparation of this vocabulary before being supplied to the learners:

- the lexical content must be based on the needs of learners, and the vocabulary skills must be actively taught, learned and, if possible, adapted to their needs;
- each lexicon presentation must occur in multiple contexts. A combination of spoken and written activities is also necessary;
- it is important to master the language functions of the learned lexicon to be able to use it effectively;
- and finally, it is essential to combine in textbooks editorial and communicative lexicon, especially when they are distant as in the case of Arabic.

The comparative approach that we propose is not only intended to connect the literary Arabic and the regional dialect of Damascus. Lexicon obtained by this method may also be useful in situations of communication with other Arabic dialects. These dialects contain also lots elements that are common with or linked to literary Arabic words.

In some institutions in the Arab world, the regional dialect is taught at the request of learners. This is the case also in Higher Language Institute of Damascus. However, learning a dialect will not have much use when the learner goes to another Arab country where regional dialect is different.

We propose this approach firstly to encourage better use of vocabulary learned in class in different situations of Syrian language practice. Secondly, it is to help the learner to use this lexicon to, at least, understand the language used in other regions or in other Arab countries.

The application of this approach does not mean to exclude the classic and modern literary Arabic in teaching programs. The teaching of these two language varieties is still justified for the comprehension and the production of written Arabic.

This approach is a proposal method of a possible solution to the problem of polyglossia of Arabic language. However, there is still much work to do especially at the syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis of the language of everyday communication, and the level of development of educational tools for training and evaluation of acquired skills.

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