

AN INVESTIGATION OF ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH TEACHING AND
LEARNING ARABIC FOR U.S. STUDENTS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Arabic is gaining ground in U.S. Universities and new Arabic programs have been established. American Students' registration in Arabic classes has increased rapidly in recent years. Through my participation for several years as a teaching assistant in the university where this research is conducted and lecturer of Arabic in other American institutions, I have noticed that American students face major difficulties in learning Arabic as a foreign language. There are striking conceptual and structural dissimilarities between Arabic and English. Arabic presents certain types of phonological, morphological and syntactical difficulties to the English-speaking students. Not enough research has explored the factors influencing learning Arabic and the teaching materials used in class. To this end, this study investigates the challenges that American students face in learning Arabic and explores the factors influencing learning Arabic in reading and writing. The data of this study was collected in a Midwestern university. A teacher and six American students learning Arabic were interviewed and observed in class to see the difficulties they face in learning Arabic and the factors that impact their learning. Students' tests and homework were assessed. The study critically assesses the teaching and learning of Arabic, and provides some recommendations that are peculiar to the study setting as well as to the general field of teaching Arabic as a foreign language in the United States. Findings suggest that extra curricular activities should be promoted in teaching and learning Arabic in U.S. universities.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Many researchers have investigated the complexity of Arabic, but have not provided adequate possibilities to overcome and reduce the challenges that students are facing in learning Arabic. The significance of this study can be seen theoretically and practically. It goes beyond classical language analysis and attempts to investigate the factors influencing learning and teaching of Arabic. Finally, it discusses possible ways to reduce the challenges that students face in learning Arabic. This study will be useful not only to students but to teachers as well.

Arabic Growth in U.S. Universities

A strong case can be made that the teaching of Arabic is gaining ground and has matured as a profession in the United States. Students' enrollment in Arabic classes has increased rapidly in recent years and shows no sign of decreasing in the near future (Al-Batal and Belnap, 2006). Arabic classes in colleges and universities have seen a burgeoning enrollment by an astonishing 92.5% from a total of 5,505 in 1998 to 10,584 in 2002 (Allen, 2004; Welles, 2004). In a similar vein, Rabiee (2010) noticed that Arabic language enrollment shot up more than 125 percent between 2002 and 2006 while enrollment in all foreign languages increased by less than 13 percent during the same time. The Modern Language Association (MLA) reported that the number of American students enrolling in Arabic programs is expected to keep increasing due to various reasons, among which is the direct U.S. military involvement in the Middle East. A number of universities have expanded or added full fledged Arabic programs to their

curriculum and several universities have established new summer programs in the Arab world that aim to provide American students with the opportunity to study Arabic in its genuine cultural setting. Expansion in the field of Arabic also touched the organizational aspects of the profession. The American Association of Teachers of Arabic (AATA) has experienced a significant increase in its membership both at the institutional and individual levels (Ryding, 2006).

Even before the military involvement in Iraq, Dillon (2003) wrote in the New York Times, “As the pursuit of Al’Qa’eda and America’s confrontation with Iraq intensifies, Arabic speaking educators and Islamic organizations, as well as universities and schools across the nation, are straining to respond to requests by students and the public for information and instruction about the language and culture of Islam” (p. 1). Universities have expanded new Arabic language programs to cope up with the increasing number of students and the higher demand for learning Arabic. Furthermore, many institutions “have sought to move away from the more traditional system in which the basic language courses were taught by faculty members to appoint instead new professionally trained Arabic teachers” (Allen, 2004, p. 275).

The situation of the Arabic program in the Department of Linguistics at the University where this study is conducted is not very different from that described for other Arabic programs nationally. A lecturer of Arabic was appointed in 2005. The program has made significant progress both quantitatively and qualitatively and has significantly contributed to the spread of Arabic in U.S. The enrollment capacity of students in the Arabic program is satisfactory. The program offers elementary, high elementary, intermediate, high intermediate, and advanced levels. The purpose of the

elementary level is to familiarize students with the Arabic sounds and alphabet as well as the basic background needed to develop their reading comprehension and their writing skills. Students are expected at the end of the semester to sustain a simple conversation on a number of topics and write simple passages about familiar topics.

In considering the intermediate and high intermediate levels, it is revealing to note that the purpose of these classes is to increase the students' knowledge of the core grammar of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and to expand the students' working vocabulary to enable them to read Arabic. Listening, reading, writing, and conversation are the main skills worked on in the advanced courses. Exercises offered at this level are designed to develop reading comprehension and enhance writing skills. Students at the advanced level are expected to use MSA to express opinions, describe attitudes and develop conversational skills to discuss topics of interest using a variety of language functions (e.g. clarification, description, comparison, reasoning, argumentation, supporting ideas with the appropriate evidence, etc).

The challenge of Arabic instruction in U.S. university contexts

Through my participation for several years as a teaching assistant in the university where this research is conducted, I have noticed that American students face major difficulties in learning Arabic as a foreign language. The United States Foreign Service Institute (FSI) has classified languages into four levels or degrees of difficulty, based on the amount of time to attain a certain level of proficiency. According to the FSI ranking (Liskin-Gasparro, 1982, cited in Stevens, 2006), Group 1 (relatively easy) languages include French, Spanish, and Norwegian; Group 2 languages include German,

Greek, and Farsi; Group 3 languages include Czech, Russian, Finish, and Turkish; and Group 4 languages (relatively difficult) languages include Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese.

Arabic presents certain types of phonological and syntactical difficulties to the English-speaking student due to the vast differences between the two languages. However, these difficulties can be overcome with adequate practice and by rights such difficulties should be weighed against any problems caused by the process of instruction and the material used in class (Kara, 1976). Stevens (2006) even questioned the FSI ranking. He compared the various aspects of the languages ranked by FSI and found that Arabic not to be complicated, calling into question claims about Arabic's extraordinary difficulty. He claimed that Arabic does not deserve to be placed in the most difficult category. Hence, research in this area should go beyond the classical studies conducted on Arabic which focused on the linguistic complexity of this language in terms of phonology, morphology, and syntax. Instead, any study conducted should also tackle other factors influencing learning and teaching of Arabic such as psychological factors (e.g., motivation attitude, opportunity and exposure, the number of languages previously learned), and pedagogical factors (teaching methodology and teaching materials). It must also focus on the validity of the tests given to the students. In fact, assessment is crucial to determine the skills students have acquired or lack. Due to the necessity of test administration, it is of utmost importance to design tests that are valid and accurately test the target skill. In light of this, the primary purpose of this study is to investigate the challenges and the factors that influence the teaching and learning of Arabic as a foreign language by U.S. university students in reading and writing. This study may serve as a tool for improving the quality and quantity of Arabic meant to be taught to the American

students learning Arabic in American academic institutions. The questions that motivate this research are (a) what is the foreign language history, literacy and practices of the participants? (b) what are the challenges that the participants face in learning Arabic, and (c) what factors influence the learning and teaching of Arabic?

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study can be seen theoretically and practically. The study is significant for language learning and teaching in that it will shed light on the challenges and problems that students face in learning Arabic. The study also attempts to investigate the factors that influence the learning and teaching of Arabic and looks for potential ways to respond to the challenges that U.S. students are facing in learning Arabic. Therefore, the significance of this study is that it touches on some areas that have not received much attention in the past. From the practical perspective, this research will highlight the most basic areas of Arabic language students are interested in learning. This will help the administration and instructors alike to focus more on those areas in their teaching, syllabi design and lesson plans. The study will also show whether teachers are aware of the most recent techniques in teaching and assessing students. I firmly believe that the days when teachers and students who proclaim that Arabic is either difficult or different should be at an end. It is my hope that this study will place Arabic within the fold of other foreign languages as they are taught in the Western world, rather than to keep it outside that milieu, like some exotic plant.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Originating as part of the study of the Bible and Semitics within the broader framework of comparative philology and linguistics, Arabic becomes one of the primary languages of practical choice among American learners of foreign languages at the collegiate level in the post- 9/11 era. The political environment within which Arabic has been taught and learned has led to a continual change of curricula in the teaching and learning of Arabic, moving from philology-based to four skills methodology.

History of Arabic in USA and Research Studies

Early history of Arabic in USA

According to Nydell (1996), Arabic is not only a means of communication, but also a vehicle of renowned civilization. It is spoken by more than 260 million people and it is the official language of 22 countries. Millions more use it in adjacent to their mother languages in other Muslim countries. It is also the sixth international language in the United Nations and third in the Organization of African Unity.

The history of Arabic teaching in the USA is bound with the study of the Bible and the emergence of Semitic studies (Allen, 1992). Ryding (2006) pointed out that Arabic was taught early in the United States, having been added to the offerings of Harvard University's courses in Semitic languages (Hebrew, Chaldaic, and Syriac) between 1654 and 1672. In a similar vein, McCarus (1992) noted that "This became the typical pattern, instituting first Hebrew and cognate languages and then Arabic soon after" (p. 207). McCarus explained that Arabic was being taught in the USA over a

century before the signing of the Declaration Independence. It was introduced to complement the study of Hebrew and the Old Testament (p. 207). McCrus reported that Harvard was the first U.S. College to introduce Semitic languages, “Offering Hebrew, Chaldaic, and Syriac in 1640... Arabic was added during the presidency of Charles Chauncy, between 1654 and 1672” (p. 207).

History of Arabic since World War II

Allen (1992) points out that the global conflict brought about by the World War II was a major catalyst in a change of attitudes towards the important role of second language competence. With the American involvement in World War and the emergence of the Army Specialized Training Program, the goals of the field of foreign language teaching shifted from the grammar translation method to the audiolingual mode, which aimed at proficiency in speaking and listening as well reading, writing, and translation.

The National Defense and Education Act (NDEA) adopted previous Princetonian terminology in designating certain language groups as Critical. Arabic was named as such and funds began to be made available for new teaching appointments, centers, research, and students grants. The period following the NDEA saw the establishment of the American Association of Teachers of Arabic. According to Allen (1992), part of the activity of the American association of Arabic has been concerned with the crucial area of testing. He mentioned two sponsored projects that had produced standardized tests of reading, listening, and reading skills. The tests have been used by universities and national programs for both permanent and evaluation processes.

Heath (1990) observed that between 1883 and prior to 1950, teaching Arabic was the specialty of philologists who were interested in Arabic because their research

included classical documents written in Classical Arabic. Therefore, much emphasis was given to Classical Arabic while spoken Arabic was ignored. The teaching of Arabic focused on the grammatical rules and memorizing lists of vocabulary (Allen, 1990). This helps to explain the dominance of the Grammar-Translation method. According to Abuhakema (2004), “Students were expected to translate ancient texts in writing in both directions: to and from the target, Arabic, before advancing to deal with advanced texts” (p. 64).

As stated above, World War II brought about a revolution in Arabic studies. It showed how intelligence personnel were unprepared to do research on the Arab world. McCarus (1992) argued that as a direct consequence of the war effort, several agencies of the U.S. government set up language training for Arabic. Many studies were conducted for this purpose, among of which was Charles Ferguson’s work in Beirut, whose mission was to provide intensive training in Arabic. He established the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) there as a direct result of this research. The institute “remained there until political conditions obliged it to move to Tunis, where it is located today” (p. 209). McCarus also asserted that the army began including Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Arabic dialects in the curriculum of its Army Language School in Monterey in California. The CIA and the National Security Agency were teaching Arabic by the early 1950s and have produced their own instructional materials for Arabic (McCarus, 1992). It is also crucial to note that the Peace Corps has trained many U.S. citizens in Arabic dialects. This training “has typically been followed by two years of service in the field, permitting functional fluency in that dialect” (McCarus, 1992, p. 210).

Immediately after World War II, “New emphasis on Arabic and Modern Near Eastern studies came in the newly organized school of advanced international studies in Washington, which later became associated with the Johns Hopkins University” (Hanna, 1964, p. 2). According to Hanna, these studies were directed to the MA and Ph.D. degrees. In 1994, the first comprehensive effort to cover the Arab Middle East was made at Princeton University where Turkish and Persian were added to Arabic, which had been offered in conjunction with Islamic studies since 1927 (p.2).

History of curriculum and methods of teaching reforms

In the past, Arabic, under the influence of classic language instruction, was usually taught through a Grammar-Translation Approach. The students were taught a set of rules of grammar and a list of vocabulary items and then were expected to translate from Arabic to English and visa versa. Speaking and listening skills were completely ignored. With the advent of the Audio Lingual Method in teaching foreign languages in 1950s and 1960s, a shift was made towards newer methods of teaching that focused on communication instead of reading and writing skills. Al-Batal (1995) pointed out that during the 1980s, developments that were taking place in the field of foreign language education in general began to influence the Arabic teaching profession (p. 2). More specifically, there were an increased interest in the communicative approach and the emergence of the proficiency movement. Heath (1990) reported that the first response was an inclination toward teaching Modern Standard Arabic instead of Classical Arabic as it is the widely used variety in the Arab world. According to Abuhakema (2004), the language programs such as the Defense Language Institute and the Foreign Service Institute did not provide language training that students needed. Therefore, introductory

materials to Modern Standard Arabic were attuned to develop learning skills. This reform, Abuhakema argues, “was represented by modifying the texts the teachers were using rather than adjusting the pedagogical approaches for language instruction” (p. 65). Abuhakema reported that the second wave of reform which took place in 1960s had three forms which have revolutionized the instruction of Arabic in the United States. First and foremost, there was a shift of interest in the colloquial dialects of Arabic. Second, a new series of textbooks in Modern Standard Arabic were published. Third, a consortium of eight universities established the Center of Arabic Studies Abroad (CASA). The impact of CASA has been both national and international. CASA is known for its competent staff, devoted directors and motivated students. McCarus (1987) explained that the success of CASA is due to the great support from the host institutions and from the U.S. Department of Education. McCarus (1992) also argued that “the one factor that made it possible for all of these to have their full effect was the fact that CASA was set up as an advanced level, rather than an elementary, language program” (p. 215).

With the introduction of the proficiency-based approach, the focus has been on the oral skill, namely listening and speaking. According to Allen (1990), teaching and learning Arabic followed the pattern of other languages and some projects were launched in different universities such as the *Let's Learn Arabic Project* at the University of Pennsylvania in 1986, the *Ahlan wa Sahlan Project* at the Ohio State University in 1989, and Middlebury College's *Schools of Arabic Proficiency-Material Project* in 1991. These initiatives were part of a natural process towards functionality (Heath, 1990). In a similar vein, Al-Batal (1995) saw that the application of the proficiency-based approach has been coupled with the development of new textbooks, among of which are Hardan

et.'s *mina al-khalij ilaa al-Muħiit* (1980), El-Sa'id Badawi et al.'s *Al-Kitaab al Asaasi*, Parts I and II (1983 and 1984), Raji Rummuny's *Advanced Standard Arabic* (1994), and Brustad et.al's *al-kitaab fi ta'allum al-'arabiyya* (1995). Beyond these MSA materials, a number of colloquial teaching materials have been produced, including El-Tonsi et al's *Intensive Course in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic* (1987), Marget Nydell's *Series From Modern Standard Arabic to the Dialect* (1992), and Lutfi Hussein's *Levantine Arabic for Non-Natives* (1993) (Al-Batal, 1995, p. 4).

Abuhakema (2004) reported that the establishment of the ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines in 1982 has had a significant impact on the teaching of Arabic theoretically and practically. Allen (1985) began the Arabic Proficiency Guidelines. Abuhakema reported that Allen and a committee of teachers of Arabic revised these Guidelines and republished them in 1989 by ACTFL. The ACTFL guidelines provide detailed descriptions of the degree of accuracy and flexibility that learners of a language are able to control at different levels in each of the four language learning skills. According to ACTFL guidelines all four learning skills share the following levels: (a) Novice-Low, (b) Novice-Mid, (c) Novice-High, (d) Intermediate-Low, (e) Intermediate-Mid, (f) Intermediate-High, (g) Advanced, (h) Advanced Plus, and (i) Superior. Listening and reading have an additional level, namely (j) Distinguished.

At the practical level, Allen and Allouche (1988) devised a proficiency-based syllabus *Let's Learn Arabic* for teaching MSA (p. 66). The impact of the proficiency approach was echoed in the publication of *Al-Kitaab* series by Abbas Al-Tonsi, Kristen Brustad, and Mahmoud Al-Batal in 1995. It is the most widely used book in the Arabic programs in USA, including the Arabic program at the university where this study was

conducted. The first volume introduces the Arabic alphabet and sound and aimed at teaching Arabic to English speaking students. It aims to help English speaking students to pronounce the sounds of Arabic and write its letters, and to introduce to them a number of greetings, common phrases, and basic vocabulary. The philosophy of the first part of the second volume is to help students reach proficiency in Arabic. Each chapter devotes attention to all skills, listening, reading, writing, and speaking using the basic building blocks of vocabulary and grammar in the format of drills and activities. The second part of the second volume was designed to help students move from an intermediate level of skill to a more advanced one, with which students can read and discuss topics of professional interest, including many aspects of Arabic culture.

Research and studies about teaching and learning Arabic

Arabic has been the focus of many research studies. Many studies have been conducted in phonology, syntax, morphology, and sociolinguistics.

The linguistic research works which were conducted in the area of phonology were mostly contrastive and comparative studies between Arabic and English. The objective of these studies was to discover the similarities and differences between these two languages. Several articles exist that established a contrast between various forms of Arabic and English. Setian (1974) presented a comparison on the morphological and syntactic levels of some of the differences between colloquial Egyptian Arabic and English. He argued that the comparison of Colloquial Egyptian Arabic and English in terms of morphology and syntax is extremely revealing. He also explained that “Arabic and English are almost antipodal to each other: the former being a highly synthetic (agglutinative) language, whereas the latter is highly analytic (isolating)” (p. 253).

Malick (1956) compared and contrasted a number of clusters in both Arabic and English. She argued that the main problem in learning a new language is not learning vocabulary items, but the mastery of the sound system in order to hear the distinctive features and to approximate their production (p. 65). Unlike these studies which were aimed at teaching English, Asfoor's (1982) study is mainly geared to the teaching of Arabic.

Asfoor (1982) investigated the Arabic sounds that American speakers of English find most difficult to learn and whether the dialectal differences of English speakers are significant for the acquisition of the pronunciation of these sounds. In this study he took as subjects thirty five American students of Arabic at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) in Monterey in California. The study examined a selected number of phonological items in Arabic to determine the nature and degree of difficulty which speakers of English at DLIFLC encountered in learning Arabic pronunciation. Asfoor resorted to rating and ranking the relative frequency of errors made by students in pronouncing Arabic phonemes on a three point scale: 1= not difficult, 2= moderately difficult, and 3= difficult, in the initial, medial, and final position of all Arabic phonemes. Asfoor also used pretest and posttest scans on taped oral tests of students' ability to pronounce Arabic sounds, on a scale of 1= poor to 2= acceptable to 3=good.

Asfoor (1982) found out that American speakers of English find most difficult pronouncing those Arabic phones which do not exist in English or in American dialects of English. He also confirmed that the American dialect spoken by students seemed to have no effect on their ability to pronounce the difficult Arabic phonemes. He asserted

that the phone [ʕ] is the most difficult Arabic phoneme for American speakers of English to pronounce in its three positions (initial, medial, and final). This sound is produced by constriction (narrowing) of the throat and expulsion of the breath with the vocal cords vibrating such as the pronunciation of “Amman” by a native speaker. The general conclusion of this study is that American students learning Arabic faced most difficulties with Arabic phonemes which have no correlates in English (El-Nekishbendy, 1990).

Arabic diglossia and its effect on the teaching of Arabic

The term *diglossia* (i.e. multiple Arabic varieties) was introduced by Ferguson (1959). He argued that there are two varieties in the Arabic linguistic situation. He named the superposed variety as the high (H) variety and the regional dialect as the low (L) variety. A number of linguists have challenged Ferguson’s High/ Low dichotomy. For example, Blanc (1960) and Badawi (1973) identified different intermediate levels between fusHa and the colloquial. Badawi identified five different levels (a) FusHa al-turath (fusHa of the Arab/Islamic heritage); (b) FusHa al-‘asr (contemporary FusHa); (c) ‘ammiyya al-muthaqqafin (vernacular of the educated); (d) ‘ammiyyat al-mutanawwiriin (vernacular of the enlightened, literate); and (e) ‘ammiyyat al-ummiyyin (vernacular of the illiterate).

Abuhamdia (1988) refused to accept any interpretation of the Arabic language situation as problematic. He believed that understanding the Arabic language situation requires acknowledgement of social values and forces, including the religion and culture. He argued that many researchers “have adopted a monolithic (socio-) linguistic theory, dismissing the consequences of societal values and forces that could, and in the case of Arabic do, influence the course of language change” (pp. 33-34). He rejected Ferguson’s

assumption that the Arabic language situation is unique, unparalleled, and different from other language communities. He asserted that Arabic diglossia should not be looked as a problem:

I will argue that while natively acquired (spoken) varieties of Arabic differ in structural aspect, such features of variation as well as the acquisition of the home variety of any language are universal. This is particularly the case in all languages used over extended territories. The controversy engendered over the dichotomy between regional varieties and the standard variety of Arabic (allegedly unique to Arabic and a handful of other languages) was a symptom of social and intellectual division in the Arab world earlier in this century. (Abuhamdia, 1988, p. 34)

Ryding (2006) explained that diglossia refers to the fact that Arabs read and write one form of language (the so called “high”) and use the spoken vernacular (the so called “low”) to communicate among each other. However, for everyday spoken communication with each other, Arabs speak language variants that are substantially different. Slight differences between Standard Arabic are found in vocabulary and syntax in different Arab countries. The Arabic used in everyday conversation is quite different from the written form in its sounds, grammar, and vocabulary. Azzam (1990) pointed out that in spoken Arabic the following phonemes are dropped: "ث ذ ص ض ط ظ ق". Short vowels are also eliminated in open syllables (p. 5). Azzam explained that spoken Arabic has greater vowel range and a richer phonetic system than Standard Arabic. She also pointed out that Standard Arabic involves some grammatical categories that are not available in the spoken language. These include case inflections and dual forms for pronouns and verbs.

With greater emphasis on communication in teaching Arabic, we are faced with the question whether Standard Arabic (H) or one of the colloquial varieties (L) should be used in the Arabic program. Several alternatives have been proposed.

Alosh (1992) argued that no other variety of Arabic should be used in class if the class teaches MSA. He asserted that it is not unusual to discuss passages written in MSA in the colloquial in the Arab world classes. He attributed this to the sociolinguistic situation of the Arab world where the Arabic speaking student comes into the classroom almost fully proficient in the local dialect. He argued that students come to the classroom with knowledge of Arabic and view the diglossic situation as a continuum rather than as different varieties. Alosh warned that the situation is completely different in the U.S. foreign language classroom. He pointed out that U.S. students come to the class to learn the language as a system in order to put it into use and not to use it for subject matter learning. Alosh saw that “learning a colloquial variety by and for itself, however, has sociolinguistic and evaluative drawbacks. A U.S. learner with knowledge of colloquial Arabic only is basically illiterate” (p. 265). Alosh’s belief is based on the conviction that proficiency in a particular language entails that a speaker possesses functional abilities in that language such as the ability to describe, tell the time, and persuade. To achieve this in the Arabic program, communicative activities should be designed to train students to express certain language functions in MSA.

Al-Batal (1992) asserted that the diglossic nature of Arabic has tremendous pedagogical implications and poses serious challenges to both teaching and learning Arabic (p. 289). Therefore, teachers of Arabic as a foreign language are continuously faced with the question of which variety of Arabic to teach, especially where oral skills are involved. Unlike Alosh (1992) who advocated and called for using MSA in the classroom, Al-Batal presented an alternative approach to deal with the diglossic situation in Arabic classrooms. He advocated the Middle Language Approach which is “based on

the teaching of a variety of Arabic that is believed to exist between MSA and the dialects” (p. 296). Al-Batal referred to this variety as Educated Spoken Arabic or al-Lugha alwusTaa (Middle language). Al-Batal contended that “using this approach will definitely enhance our students’ ability to communicate but will not produce oral proficiency in the real sense” (p. 296). He also pointed out that the use of the middle language should be introduced in the Arabic classrooms and incorporated within an integrated approach whose aim is to develop oral proficiency in the other varieties of Arabic as well.

Issues about the diglossic nature of Arabic have also been tackled most tellingly by Nielsen (1996). Nielsen adopted Badawi’s (1973) continuum model which clearly and precisely defines the interaction between the spoken and written varieties of Arabic. Badawi (1973), reported in Nielsen (1996), argued that the language situation in the Arab world consists of an integrated continuum of five levels, namely Classical Arabic (CA), MSA, Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA), and Illiterate Spoken Arabic (ISA). Badawi asserted that the use of these levels depends on the speaker’s educational background. Badawi thought that the ESA is the most suitable variety to use. Nielsen, however, argued that “ESA is a mixed variety, which is very badly codified” (p. 225). He argued that there are problems related to teaching this variety. Instead, he called for using the Supra-Regional Varieties (SRV) such as the Cairo variety. He contended that the SRV is the most interesting variety to be used in teaching Arabic as it is more widely understood than ESA.

Younes (2006) presented a description of a program for teaching Arabic as a foreign language. The program integrates a spoken Arabic dialect with MSA in a single

course of instruction in a way that reflects the use of the language by native speakers. The choice of this integrated approach, Younes argued, was prompted by student needs as well as linguistic and pedagogical considerations. Younes pointed out the colloquial and MSA are two sides of the same coin. More specifically, he claimed that the two varieties are not separated from or independent of each other, but complement one another to form one system of communication. Without one or the other the proficiency of such speaker is incomplete (p. 159). He explained that the goal of the Arabic as a foreign language is to prepare students to be proficient in Arabic in all skills. Therefore, teaching them MSA or a dialect only is not sufficient. He also warned against teaching the two varieties independently of each other as this creates “an unnatural division in the language and results in a great amount of duplication and waste because a large number of words and structures that are common to both need to be taught twice” (p. 164). Younes confirmed that treating Arabic as one system of communication with a spoken side and a written side and a common core is pedagogically more effective.

Indeed, one can find other studies in Arabic that deal mainly with sociolinguistics, phonology, morphology, and syntax of the language. However, very meager efforts have been taken to investigate the factors influencing Arabic learning. In my opinion, it is important to investigate the factors encountered by American students in reading, listening, speaking, and writing. In what follows, I will provide a literature review about these factors.

Factors Influencing Language Acquisition/Learning

Research has demonstrated that a variety of factors have an impact on the ability of the particular students to learn a foreign language. Schumann's (1986) taxonomy of social, affective, and cognitive factors affecting second language acquisition is one framework with which some of the factors are related. Moreover, sociolinguistic factors such as the influence of cultural values may be viewed as valid predictors of how certain learners may approach language learning. Attitudes and their effect upon motivation in conjunction with students' motivational orientations, levels of anxiety, and degrees of risk taking also impact learning (Niehoff, 1999). Pedagogical factors such as the teaching methodology and teaching materials used in class have an influence in learning as well. The following sections present significant studies that deal with the major factors influencing language learning, namely sociocultural, sociocognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical factors.

Psycho-social factors

The psycho-social factors include motivation, attitude, social milieu, ease of adjustment and social distance from the target language speaking community (English, 1997). Gardner and Lambert's (1972) study of attitudes and motivation served as the primary catalyst for second language researchers to consider the role of affective variables in foreign language learning. They argued that the learners' ethnocentric attitudes towards the members of a language group are believed to determine their success in learning a language. Schumann (1976) speculated that the social context can enhance or inhibit success in learning a foreign language. Schumann argued that learners who come from a culture similar to the L2 target culture and have opportunities for

contact with speakers of the target culture will be more successful than with those from different culture who have little or no contact with speakers of the target language.

According to Kenny (1992), students' attitudes are the key elements in the acquisition of second and foreign languages. He pointed out that a better understanding of students' perceptions and attitudes could enable teachers to use more effective teaching methods and materials. He also argued that "achievement levels have been correlated with students' cultural backgrounds, intergroup relations, exposure to the language outside of class, degree of culturally knowledge and reaction to parental attitudes toward the language. All of these factors have a direct or indirect bearing on student motivation and on attitudes toward second and foreign language learning" (p. 120).

Abu-Rabia (1993)'s study explored the attitudes that L1 students have towards L2 language and how their attitudes and cultural background affect their L2 learning. Abu-Rabia investigated these questions among students from different social contexts: Arab students in Israel learning Hebrew, Israeli students in Israel studying English, and Arab students in Canada studying English. Abu Rabia found that the instrumental motivation and the cultural content of texts were the strongest factors affecting reading comprehension in second language regardless of social context (see Abu-Ulbah's (1993) study for similar results).

Sociocultural factors

Generally speaking, the main tenets of the sociocultural approach are its concern with explaining the influence of culture, language background, social structure on schooling and literacy achievement. Explanations are often grounded in degree of mismatch between home/school culture and language. The more similar school is to

home/community, the greater the degree of success for students. There is also a desire and concern with matching instruction and culture of school to that of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Sociocultural advocates usually use qualitative or ethnographic techniques for data collection. Some use experimental techniques. The advocates of this approach demonstrated in their studies that culturally and linguistically familiar instruction leads to increased students involvement in learning because it gets students involved in higher order learning processes.

Reyes (1992) presented a case study that provides an example of process instruction that proves to be successful for both mainstream students and those who are linguistically different (p.427). Through students' writing in a case study, Reyes showed that language use is determined by sociocultural factors. Reyes discovered that students as a group perform better when their cultural and linguistic backgrounds are brought to the foreground and used as foundation for learning in the school.

The descriptive aspect of English's (1997) study concentrated attention on the way Muslim African American adolescents confronted specific problems in learning Arabic, taking a holistic view of factors which affected the unique dynamics of the classroom situation. The central issue to be examined in English's study was whether the academic performance of African American students learning Arabic could be enhanced through innovative and culturally relevant approaches to teaching. An inherent component of this investigation identified the contributing pedagogical, sociocultural and linguistics factors which influenced Muslim African American students during the language learning process. The informants of this study were eight African American students, seven boys and one girl, ranging from ages thirteen to fifteen and in the 7th and

8th grades. All students were from low-income families. The findings of this study, assessed through both subjective and objective analyses, indicated that the teaching methods utilized in this project, in conjunction with other social and cultural factors, had some form of influence on a particular group of African American student informants. English argued that a variety of factors were found to have an impact on the ability of the students to learn a foreign language and that some of these factors fell within established pedagogical framework and some did not. English explained that Schumann's (1986) taxonomy of social, personality, affective, and cognitive factors affecting second language acquisition was one framework with which some of the factors were related (p. 181). English also explained that sociolinguistic factors such as the influence of cultural values and norms on language learning might also be viewed "as valid predictors of how certain students may approach language learning situations" (p. 182).

The aim of Niehoff's (1999) study was to describe the initial attitudes and motivational orientations of college-level Arabic language, Arabic culture and Arabic literature students and investigate the effect of culture teaching upon their attitudes and perceptions of Arabs and the Arab world. The study also aimed at determining the extent to which students' initial attitudes and motivational orientations are related to any changes in attitudes or success in foreign language and culture learning as a result of their participation in Arabic language, Arabic culture, and Arabic literature class. The study showed that the teaching of Arabic culture within Arabic language, Arabic literature, and Arabic culture classrooms had different effects upon students' gains in cultural knowledge and change in attitudes towards Arabs. The study confirmed that students who were more motivated had a positive change in attitudes towards Arabs and expressed a

desire to learn more about the language and culture. Neihoff strongly suggested that foreign language (FL) classroom curricula need to be restructured to include teaching about culture in combination with intercultural communication to stop the negative change in students' attitudes that resulted from the study of a foreign language (p. 257). She asserted that one possible way to produce a highly-structured, culturally oriented FL classroom is to integrate the teaching of Arabic language and its literature and culture into a single course of study. She pointed out that such culturally oriented foreign language class may “ increase strength of student’s integrative motivational orientations for language study, which in turn promotes positive change in attitudes and persistence in FL study for beginning level Arabic language students” (p. 257).

Socio-cognitive factors

Lee (2005) pointed out the close relationship between knowledge and context. He argued that socio-cognitive approaches have “the strong commitment to the role of social interaction and negotiation” (p. 17). In a socio-cognitive approach, factors include explaining comprehension, memory and metalinguistic tools and process necessary to create understanding of the text. There is an instructional focus on providing readers with cognitive tools, background knowledge and literacy. Cognitive approaches mostly demonstrate that many of the strategies, background knowledge necessary for L1 comprehension can be successfully applied to L2 literacy.

A study by Droop and Verhoeven (1998) of Dutch, Moroccan and Turkish children in the Netherlands indicated that “background knowledge” facilitates comprehension of the text. The study indicated that Turkish and Moroccan children performed better than Dutch students when the texts were linguistically simple and

written about a familiar topic. Moroccan and Turkish students obtained higher scores on texts referring to their culture than on texts which referred to Dutch culture or a neutral culture. This facilitating effect of cultural familiarity was found for both reading comprehension and reading efficiency (p. 253). However, Bernhardt (1991) argued that it is difficult to see any influence of background knowledge on second language reading (pp. 98-117).

A study by Jiménez, García, and Pearson (1996) showed that successful Latina/o readers are more aware of the linguistic differences in the two languages and can use mechanisms of “searching for cognates, transferring and translating” more effectively than those of monolingual readers (p. 41). Similar research has indicated that although bilingual adults are slower in their processing abilities in their first and second languages than monolingual adults, they can use more strategies for reading (Jiménez, García, and Pearson, 1996). Research on bilingual students’ reading strategies entails how readers conceive the reading task and how they make sense of what they read. Jiménez, García, and Pearson’s (1995) case study described the cognitive and metacognitive of three sixth grade students. This was accomplished by comparing the reading processes and strategies of proficient bilingual Latina students with those of a marginally proficient bilingual reader and a proficient monolingual reader. Participants were tested in prompted and unprompted think aloud tasks, interviews, retellings, prior knowledge related to the topics of the reading and a questionnaire. Jiménez, García, and Pearson found four key dimensions that distinguished the proficient bilingual reader’s performance from the performance of the proficient monolingual reader and the marginally proficient bilingual reader. They argued that explicit knowledge of the relationship between Spanish and

English can facilitate bilingual students' reading comprehension. They also argued that unknown vocabulary in English was an obstacle to reading comprehension for two bilingual students; and that reading expertise and bilingualism visibility affected the reading comprehension of the bilingual students. The cultural background and linguistic familiarity of the reading texts created a qualitatively different experience for the proficient monolingual reader.

Linguistic factors (linguistic transfer)

One prevalent view is that matters of relative ease or difficulty depend largely on the degree of similarity that exists between the target language and one's native language. If one's native language and the target language are relatively similar, then reading and writing, for example, in the first language has an influence on the reading and writing processes of the second language in that language strategies transfer from language to another. It allows the student to encode more easily. However, this transfer might not be to the benefit of the learner (MacLean and d'Anglejan, 1986 cited in Bernhardt 1991, p. 52). Bernhardt argued that learners who are learning two languages which have different orthographies do not have this advantage (p.76). Generally speaking, the influence of the first language can be seen more clearly in the case of adults as they possess processes of automacity more than children. They perform better in tasks of second language reading and writing. Unlike adults, the children do not have this advantage as they are still in the process of developing such cognitive systems.

Pedagogical factors

More recent studies have shown that the educational context is as meaningful and significant as the social milieu in affecting learners' motivation to learn a new language.

These factors show that “factors relevant to the learning situation, such as the teaching methods, school facilities, coursebook, study material, teacher’s behavior and personality are all influential in accounting for students’ motivation or lack of it” (Donitsa-Schmidt, Inbar and Shohamy, 2004). Donitsa-Schmidt, Inbar and Shohamy’s study investigated whether changes in the educational context of teaching Arabic as a second language in Israeli schools affect students’ attitudes towards Arabic and motivation to learn it. The changes included teaching spoken Arabic rather than Modern Standard Arabic and lowering the starting age of instruction. The findings of this study revealed that students are more motivated to learn the spoken variety of Arabic than Modern Standard Arabic.

Kara (1976) studied the problems that American students faced in learning Arabic and found that the major problems were caused by teaching. She found that the teachers in the study were not trained to teach the Arabic language. The author also reported that the teaching of Arabic followed the traditional method of instruction which did not produce speakers of Arabic. Even after many years of instruction, many students were not able to speak Arabic fluently.

Justice (1987) argued that there was no widespread and longstanding tradition of popular pedagogy of Modern Standard Arabic and the teaching materials introduced to students were not satisfactory (p. 27). In a similar vein, Stevens (2006) claimed that Arabic was badly taught in the past and advances in second language teaching occurred in other languages before they did in Arabic. He pointed out that “[it] is fair to say that the field of teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language did not exist 30 years ago, certainly not in the well-developed sense that the foreign language teaching existed for other, more commonly taught languages” (p. 61). Most native Arabic teachers in American

universities are not necessarily language specialists and the process of attracting trained teachers of Arabic to American universities has become more infinitely more difficult and time consuming. Allen (2004) argued that

The stringent regulations and costs associated with obtaining the appropriate visa to work in the United States and the checking procedures at various parts of entry mean that not only are some professionals unable to attend language teaching or other academic gatherings, but the entire process becomes so intrusive that few seek participation in the first place. We thus face the dilemma of a national need for a greater number of qualified teachers of Arabic than ever before and ever-diminishing supply of such people actually or potentially resident in the country. (p. 278).

Stevens (2006) argued that the materials used in teaching Arabic were often not well designed or selected. This factor could also explain why it takes learners longer to achieve a given proficiency level in Arabic than it would be in various other languages. In his discussion of teaching Arabic in South Africa, Mohamed (1998) pointed out that Arabic textbooks generally reflect two broad approaches, the classical and the modern. He explained that the classical approach is the oldest and focuses mainly on the classical Arabic texts, using the morphological and syntactical textual analysis and its objects is to prepare students to read texts for academic and intellectual purposes. Mohamed saw that this approach proved to be effective method at universities and Islamic seminaries where Arabic is taught for theological reasons. As for the Modern approach, Mohamed argued that it deals with the Arabic of the contemporary media. It emphasizes conversation. Out of a compromise of these approaches, Mohamed opted for an eclectic approach that “contends that each method has its uses which should be exploited and that the different methods complement one another” (p. 320).

Assessment

Assessment has become widely discussed in educational journals and conferences. It is a broad and relatively nonrestrictive label for the kinds of testing and measuring that teachers must do. Soetaert (1996) reported Catlin and Kalina's (1993, p. 8) definition of classroom assessment as

The process of using informal feedback techniques in which data is systematically gathered from students frequently and anonymously about their understanding of course content and reactions to instruction. Classroom assessment could also include questions about student attitudes and background which may contribute to or impede their learning. (p.5)

According to Angelo and Cross (1993), classroom assessment should have seven characteristics. It is "learned centered, teacher directed, mutually beneficial, formative, context-specific, ongoing, and firmly rooted in good practice" (p. 4). Steadman (1994) contended that "learner centered" entails the fact that classroom assessment is teacher directed because it is directed by faculty members for the purpose of improving teaching and learning at the classroom level (p.5). Classroom assessment is context specific because it is compatible with the one-of-a kind dynamics of each classroom, depending on the combination of teacher, students, and subject matter (p.5). Steadman also pointed out that classroom assessment is "mutually beneficial" to teachers and students because it provides feedback to both teachers and learners. It is also formative because it seeks to monitor teacher effectiveness and students progress throughout the semester. Finally, classroom assessment activity is designed to be "ongoing", hence it is part of a cycle in which teachers develop questions and share with students the results of the assessment activity (p. 6).

Assessment involves many tasks including paper and pencil tasks, observation of student performance and conducting interviews with the students. According to McKenna (2003), assessment involves many terms. The term "alternative assessment" refers to any

alternative to traditional paper and pencil tests. It is an assessment that links test tasks with instructional tasks. Formative assessment refers to assessments that are used to influence instruction. McKenna asserted that formative assessment includes all activities undertaken by teachers and students which provide information to be used as feedback to modify learning activities in which students are engaged (see also Black 2000).

Performance assessment is another type of assessment and is used to define types of performances students engage during learning. Authentic assessment as advocated by Wiggins (2002) refers to assessing students understanding in real life situation. McKenna (2003) explained that students must be able to demonstrate their acquired knowledge through a performance task. Authentic assessment is a real life application of performance assessment. McKenna maintained that assessment for learning helps students to understand their learning and gives them feedback about their own work.

The need for standardized Arabic tests

Winke and Aquil (2006) noted that standardized tests of Arabic are needed more than ever to assess the proficiency of students entering college or graduate school Arabic programs, students applying for Arabic language programs within the United States or abroad, and language professionals seeking documentation of their proficiency to qualify for a job or government work. Though Arabic language enrollment in schools and universities is on the rise across the United States, the programs do not have enough resources available to develop their own in-house standardized tests.

Al-Batal (1995) reported that in 1995 there were only two national standardized programs for testing the Arabic proficiency of students, namely the American Council on Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the Arabic Proficiency Test (APT). The

former assesses the functional speaking abilities of students and the second assesses the reading and listening comprehension of learners. Winke and Aquil (2006) noted that these two tests are still in use today. Moreover, the number of Arabic proficiency tests has expanded along with the increase number of students taking Arabic. Winke and Aquil (p. 223) cited a number of Arabic tests that are intended to test Modern Standard Arabic that are either currently accessible or in development and intended for public use. These tests are Arabic Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), Arabic Proficiency Test (APT), Arabic Reading Proficiency, Arabic Rater Training Kit, Arabic Speaking Test, Online Arabic Proficiency Test (O-APT), Arabic 12/16 Point Proficiency Exam, Arabic Language Proficiency Test (ALPT), and ALTA Language Tests (see Winke and Aquil (2006) for more details about these tests). In addition, Raji Rummuny (1995) has developed the Arabic Speaking Proficiency Test (AST), which is one of the four components of the Arabic Proficiency Test (APT). It is designed to measure “general proficiency of examinees in literary Arabic in reading and writing, and spoken standard Arabic in listening and speaking” (Rammuny, 1995, p. 331).

Standardized tests of Arabic language proficiency

According to Winke and Aquil (2006), there are two types of standards used in connection with foreign language learning, namely content standard and performance standards. They explained content standard as referring to “benchmarks or outlines of what students at various grade levels or sequences of instruction should know and be able to do in the foreign or second language.... Performance standards are used to drive testing” (p. 222). They pointed out that a standardized test is developed out of a defined need that identified the test takers and why they need to be tested (p. 22). The test takes

different stages of development. Following Davidson and Lynch (2002), Winke and Aquil (2006) argued that the mandate sets the generative test development procedure in motion. After the test mandate has been given to the test developers, Winke and Aquil pointed out that the test developers are faced with the task of “(a) selecting the specific language skills to be assessed, (b) writing specifications for the tasks that will be on the tests, (c) developing the tasks, (d) pilot testing, fields testing, and trialing the task on a sample of test takers, and (e) finalizing the assessment” (p. 225). These different stages follow those stated in Davison and Lynch (2002, p. 15).

Since standards do not specify in which language (in MSA or a dialect) the tasks should be enacted, Winke and Aquil (2006) argued that it is up to the test mandate to give more information as to the language of the test. The test developers should interpret the standards so that they can be put to use as a theoretical model of language ability (p. 231).

Assessment Requirements and Problems

Linn (1990) suggested that teachers should know how to use a wide range of classroom techniques. Teachers should be trained on how to create valid and useful classroom assessment. Kancianic (2006) reported that in 1990 the American Federation of Teachers, the National Council on Measurement in Education, and the National Educational Association advocated that teachers should be skilled in choosing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions, be skilled in developing assessment methods, administering, scoring, and interpreting the results of the scores. They should also be skilled in using assessment results, communicating these assessment results to

students and parents; and recognizing unethical assessment methods (Linn & Miller, 2005, pp. 519-522).

Alosh, Elkhafaifi, and Hammoud (2006) advocated that teachers' assessment practices must be professional. In order for their assessment to be reliable, teachers must know complementary assessment instruments such as the portfolio assessment, performance based and standards-based assessment. They must know how to design a test, have information about test validity, and interpret test scores. Alosh, Elkhafaifi, and Hammoud also argued that teachers must show adequate understanding of language proficiency and competence.

Shepard (2000) pointed out that assessment "should be moved into the middle of the teaching process instead of being postponed as only the end point of instruction" (p. 10). According to Kancianic (2006), Shepard made connections between classroom assessment, reformed vision of curriculum and cognitive and constructivist learning theories. Shepard reported that "our goal should be to find ways to fend off the negative effects of externally imposed tests and to develop instead classroom assessment practices that can be trusted to help students take the next step in learning" (p.12).

Stiggins (2001) reported three barriers that can prevent teachers from implementing assessments. The first barrier involves teachers' emotions about their past assessment which influence their current practices. The second barrier is the lack of instructional time. Teachers are overwhelmed with many responsibilities. The third barrier is the lack of assessment expertise among teachers.

McMillan (2004) pointed out that there are a number of internal and external factors to be considered when planning for classroom assessment. Internal factors include

belief, expectations, and values of the teacher. External factors include state testing and district policies. In a similar vein, Messick (1981) contended that tests are not isolated events. Rather they are connected to a whole set of psychological, social and political variables that have an effect on curriculum.

García's study (1991) on Hispanic and Anglo children's reading comprehension of expository passages indicates that the Hispanic children did not score as high as the Anglo children in standardized tests. But, some of these children were also assessed in background knowledge and it was found that their score was low because of inadequate prior knowledge, some children needed more time to finish the test, and some children could not understand the questions in English because of vocabulary and could perform much better when they were allowed to use their first language. In fact, when the prior knowledge scores were taken into account in the statistical analysis, there was almost no difference between the two groups of the learners.

Critical language testing and assessment

A prevalent view is that assessment is not neutral. Rather, it is the product and agent of an educational agenda that shapes the lives of students without involving them in the process. As Foucault (1979) put it

The examination combines the technique of an observing hierarchy and those of normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to quantify, classify and punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates and judges them. That is why, in all the mechanisms of discipline, the examination is highly ritualized. In it are combined the ceremony of power and the form of experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth. At the heart of the procedures of disciplines, it manifest the subjugation of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected. (p. 184)

Viewing tests in reference to social, educational, cultural, and political contexts situates the field of assessment in the domain of critical testing.

Although there are an overwhelming number of studies on various aspects of second and foreign language reading, listening, speaking, and writing, there is very little research conducted on whether a curriculum and its tests offered to the students really meet the needs of the students and whether students' involvement in the curriculum design can lessen the difficulties students are facing in learning Arabic. Along this line, a democratic language assessment must be proposed in order to empower test-takers who have been powerless in language development. It is a process of articulating and reflecting on students' needs in the process of interacting with external and internal stakeholders (Kim, 2006). Kim argued that the power of tests with which testers and authorities are in control needed to be shared with test takers, with teachers and with parents as well. Test developers have to listen to the test takers' ideas and suggestions during test development. Kim confirmed that the exclusion of test takers from language test development would result in challenge to identify test takers' needs and reflect them is developing a language test. Therefore, we must look at test takers as a resource in test development and validation. It is also important to pay attention to the factors that affect task difficulty such as test anxiety, noise testing places, inadequate preparation and their fatigue.

Borrowing mostly from Pennycook (1994), Shohamy (1998) argued that critical language testing broadens the field of language testing and assessment by engaging it in a wider sphere of social dialogue and debate. Pennycook (2001) argued that the main response to challenges about the fairness of the language assessment is to turn inwards to

questions of test validity rather than outward to the social, cultural, and political context of the assessment. Such an approach was also advocated by Spolsky (1995) who claimed that testing has been exploited as a method of control and power. Kunnan (2000) maintained that “the social equity goes beyond equal validity and access and focuses on the social consequences of testing in terms of whether testing programs contribute to social equity or not and in general whether there are any pernicious effects due to them” (p. 4). In a similar vein, Shohamy (2000) saw that testers need to take responsibility not only for their tests but also for the uses to which their tests are put. She insisted that “language testers cannot remove themselves from the consequences and uses of tests but also for the uses to which their tests are put” (p. 18). Shohamy (2001) advocated a notion of Critical Language Testing (CLT) which starts with the assumption that the act of language testing is not neutral, but “it is a product and agent of cultural, social, political, educational and ideological agendas that shape the lives of individual participants, teachers, and learners” (p. 131). She saw tests as instrument of power and administered by powerful institutions. She pointed out that the presentation of tests and examinations in scientific terms gives the process authority. Fulcher and Davidson (2007) also expressed their concern about the politics of testing. They agreed with Hamp-Lyons (1997) in viewing testing as “a political act and instance of the exercise of power” (p. 150). Similarly, Shohamy saw test takers as “political subjects in a political context” and are encouraged to participate and develop a critical view of the tests. Preferable, therefore, is a more democratic model, where power is shared with teachers and students in the classroom context. Its description suggests “the assessment of students’ achievement ought to be seen as an art, rather than a science in that it is interpretive,

idiosyncratic, interpersonal and relative” (Shohamy 1998, p. 342). In a similar point, Shohamy (2001) encouraged the involvement of stakeholders in the decision making process, a stance with which Fulcher and Davidson (2007) agreed.

One popular alternative assessment is a portfolio. Lynch and Shaw (2005) argued that for portfolios to be considered alternative assessment, the process of selecting and assembling components, the nature of evaluating procedures must show that the students actively fully participate in the assessment process, the evaluation contains elements of peer and self-assessment, the portfolios are evaluated by people familiar with students and their context, the students participate in deciding the criterion of evaluation (p. 266). However, Lynch and Shaw explained the involvement of students in the assessment process does not entail that teachers and assessors are assigned a passive role. They cited Foucault (1997, p. 299) who argued that

I see nothing in the practice of a person who, knowing more than other in a specific game of truth, tells those others what to do, teaches them, and transmits knowledge and techniques to them.... [The problem] is knowing how to avoid the kind of domination effects where a kind is subjected to the arbitrary and unnecessary authority of a teacher, or a students is under the thumb of a professor who abuses his authority. (p. 292)

The purpose of Kim’s (2006) study was to propose a democratic language assessment where the test takers have a say in the language test development. The test development in this study was conducted with the concept of Test-Takers Referenced Testing where test takers are actively involved in the test development process. Three teachers and three test takers developed the Teaching Assistant Language Exam. The result of the study supports the positive contributions of the test takers and their effectiveness in the test development. Kim pointed out that the tests with which testers and authorities are in control need to be shared with test takers. He also argued that test

developers should listen to the test takers' ideas or suggestions during test development.

He contended that test takers can be seen as a validity argument resource and it would be a challenge to identify test takers needs and reflecting them in designing and developing a language test if they (test takers) are excluded from language test development.

Test specifications

Fulcher and Davidson (2007) defined test specifications or specs as generative explanatory documents for the creation of test tasks. They argued that “specs tell us the nuts and bolts of how to phrase the test items, how to structure the test layout, how to locate the passages, and how to make a host of difficult choices as we prepare test materials.” (p. 52). In fact, there are various models for a test specification (Bachman, 1990; Davidson & Lynch, 2002). A test specification serves as the blueprint upon which a test will be designed. According to Fulcher and Davidson, there are many styles for test specs. They contended that all test specifications have two components, namely “sample(s) of the items or tasks we intend to produce and ‘guiding language’ about the sample(s). Guiding language comprises all parts of the test spec other than the sample itself” (p.54). Popham (1978, p. 115) cited by El Atia (2003, p. 109) pointed out that test specification has two roles:

1. To communicate to test users what it is that the test is measuring, so they comprehend more accurately the nature of the behavior being measured.
2. To lay out details of the behavioral domain being measured so that item writers can generate more homogenous items. (Popham, 1978, p. 115)

A test spec can be different according to the purpose for which it is intended. It also contains several elements. Some of these elements are internal and directly linked to the test, while others are external to the test and influence it.

Reverse engineering

The name reverse engineering was first coined by Davidson and Lynch (2002). They defined it as “the creation of a test spec from representative test item/tasks” (Davidson & Lynch 2002, p. 41). Fulcher and Davidson (2007) defined it as “an analytical process of test creation that begins with an actual test question and infers the guiding language that drives it, such that equivalent items can be generated” (p. 57). In short, reverse engineering is the process of writing test specifications through an already existing test. Fulcher and Davidson argued that there are five types of reverse engineering which overlap. These include Historical Reverse Engineering, Critical Reverse Engineering, Parallel Reverse Engineering, and Straight Reverse Engineering (p. 57).

Possible New Approaches to Arabic Language Instruction Using Technology

It is well known that the key to successful teaching and learning a language is to provide a curriculum that combines the use of technology in teaching. The use of computers and related hardware such as CD-ROMS, laserdiscs, camcorders, digital cameras, and scanners enrich teaching and learning. In fact, technology should never be an obstacle to learning. However, there are basic prerequisites for using technology in teaching. One of these is knowledge of computers and word processing. Communications of students and teachers should be taught through the use of electronic system like Moodle, weblog, online chatrooms, or other forms of sophisticated technology. Ditters (2006) pointed out that the “Arabization” of technological production machinery is necessary as it is now dominated by the American-English language, be it hardware or software (p. 239).

Numerous studies have reported that technology offers many benefits. According to Collinson (2001), information technology is changing people's thinking as the printing press changed the course of history more than five centuries ago. The advent of the information technology, particularly the computer and the worldwide web, was hailed as the potential to revolutionize education and improve learning (Chihani, 1993). Collinson argued that as student use of computers increases, teachers will be more indispensable than ever to guide the intellectual, social, and moral development of children.

Ditters (2006) stated that many people have in the past learned the Arabic language without multimedia, wireless local area networks. Ditters pointed out that since we are living in an era characterized, controlled and dominated by electronic information and communication technology, teaching Arabic using technology becomes a must because of the benefits of using technology. Stevens (2006) saw that the Internet can play a critical role to help students find other speakers of a language to communicate with them. He pointed out that Arabic and other language teachers "must now rethink the effectiveness of their methods in light of the innovative potentials inherent in a truly communicative medium" (p. 254). Chow and Tsai (2002) argued that the emergence and rapid growth of computer network technologies are changing the way we live and learn. They provided new alternatives for the design, development, and access to learning materials. They addressed the challenges and provided some possible solutions. Guha (2003), for instance, reported that all of the elementary school teachers that participated in her research acknowledged the importance of technology in students' learning process, and further, teachers agreed that technology could help them in their curriculum instruction to achieve key instructional goals. Samy (2006) also argued that video and

audio clips on computers are examples of a medium that possesses significant qualities that can enhance the learning process.

Based on the findings from 174 case studies of technology use from 28 countries, Kozma (2003) concluded that teachers in many countries are starting to use technology to help change classroom teaching and learning. It seems that although educational technologies have entered the classrooms in many countries, however, studies showed that teachers are not fully incorporating technology into their teaching practices.

Some researchers have attempted to figure out why studies are finding these conflicting relationships between education and technology. For example, Wenglinsky (1998) argued that many studies which revealed negative effects of technology in education overlooked how technologies are being used. Likewise, Bernauer (1995) stated that “it is not technology per se that has resulted in improved student outcomes, but rather how the technology was used and integrated into instructional processes” (p. 1). Further, De Acosta (1993) argued that the use of standardized tests as a measure of the effects of technology might not be an appropriate method for measuring the higher thinking skills which technology itself promotes.

A large number of studies show that teachers are not using technology effectively in their instruction. Many barriers are influencing teachers’ technology use. Some teachers believe that they receive inadequate education to integrate technology in their instruction. Some of them believe they cannot use technology efficiently because they do not know how to do so. Some cannot use technology because it is not available to them. Sometimes teachers don’t have enough support. It is certain that being aware of these barriers will help in the decision making towards a successful integration of technology

into the universities. Helping teachers effectively incorporate technology into the teaching and learning process is one of the most important steps to improve language learning and teaching.

Some researchers have attempted to identify the key factors that affect teachers' technology adoption. Hong and Koh (1998), for instance, attributed the nonuse of technology to the anxiety among teachers. Teachers have some anxiety about using technology in class. Yaghi and Abu-Saba (1998) investigated computer anxiety among 308 teachers in a Lebanese school. Olivier and Shapiro (1993) contended that people with low sense of technology self efficacy will resist technological innovations. Guha's (2003) study showed that there was an inequality of resources among schools which culminates in big differences in technology use among teachers.

Na (1993) found that computer resources available for teachers in developing countries were very limited. Even when such resources existed, they were housed in computer rooms or business offices. Modum (1998) reported the lack of hardware and software in Nigerian schools, a problem that was compounded by the meager external support. Research in developing countries has frequently underscored the lack of equipment and infrastructural to be a major obstacle to educational computing initiatives.

Abas (1995) pointed to the shortage of well trained teachers as the main barrier to effective integration of technology in some institutions. In a similar point, Sagahyoon (1995) argued that among the problems of using technology in class are the dearth of qualified teachers, spread of computer illiteracy, deteriorating infrastructure base, and the absence of accepted standards to guide educational planners. In this vein, Bähler (2006) saw that global trends demand that language instructors upgrade and equip themselves

with the contemporary skills necessary to perform better in their profession (p. 275). Madhany (2006) also argued that the best Arabic learning occurs at the hands of teachers who use technology in their classes (p. 301). However, it is important to note that the Arabic speaking world was a late comer to the internet revolution because of the difficulties of using the Arabic script. Albirini (2004) stated that the majority of teachers that participated in his study reported having little or no competence in using technology. Still, he discovered that teachers had positive attitudes toward technology in education.

Teachers' Attitudes Towards Technological Innovation

The importance of teachers' attitudes towards new innovations has been universally recognized (Gressard & Loyd, 1985; Watson, 1998; Woodrow, 1992). People's attitudes towards technology are a key element in its diffusion (Rogers, 1995). However, much of the early research on computer uses in education has ignored teachers' attitudes toward the new machines. Studies focused on the computer and its effect on students' achievement, thus overlooking the psychological and contextual factors involved in the process of educational computerization (Clark, 1983; Thompson, Simonson & Hargrawe, 1992).

Christensen (1998) stated that teachers' attitudes toward computers affect not only their own computer experience, but also the experiences of the students they teach. Positive attitudes often encourage less technologically capable teachers to learn the skills necessary of the implementation of technologically-based activities in the classroom. In general, the literature points to a positive relationship between teachers' attitudes towards the use of technology and their perceptions of computer attributes. More specifically,

teachers who perceive computers as advantageous, compatible with their current practices, easy to use, and observable usually have positive attitudes toward the use of technology in education.

To sum up, the incorporation of technology in teaching can have a tremendous impact on foreign language education. Videos, computers and multimedia materials are becoming essential components of language teaching programs. Although some efforts have contributed to the use of technology in Arabic classes, they have been sporadic and limited. The opinions expressed in this section do not represent definitive answers to the challenges facing American students. Rather, they are attempts to advance the debate on these issues and to help reach consensus on the possible ways to respond to the challenges and difficulties in learning Arabic. Therefore, more empirical research in the use of technology in Arabic programs has to be conducted.

Chapter 3

Methods

I have been teaching Standard Arabic for several years and I noticed that American students are struggling to learn the language at all levels. Over this period I have always wondered where these difficulties derive from. Is it due to the nature of Arabic as a Semitic language which shows significant differences with English in terms of phonology, syntax, morphology, and semantics? A second consideration of the structure of Arabic shows that Arabic is not more difficult than Japanese and Chinese which involve more complex structures. It would be interesting to note this difficulty and explore the other reasons which have not been investigated. It is also important to go beyond the analyses conducted so far and try to critically approach them. In the following section I will present general information where this study is conducted and also provide the ethnographic context where the Arabic program is situated.

Portraying the Context of the Study

The Department of Linguistics at the university where this research has been conducted has been in the business of teaching Arabic as a foreign language for over 10 years. The Arabic program in the Department of Linguistics is part of a program that combines other languages such as Swahili, Turkish, Farsi, among others. It is under the auspices of a director. Lectures have been hired to teach these languages. The Arabic program seems to have been launched before the other languages. It started with approximately two sections in fall and spring semesters. The novice level included approximately 20 students in each section. These students were mostly students of

Muslim descent. More specifically, they were Americans from Arab and South Asian origin. The Arabic program started with a single teaching assistant (TA) who taught all levels, followed by the recruitment of other TAs. I joined the team in fall 2000 and I was assigned to teach elementary Arabic.

I thought that teaching one's language would be very easy. However, it was a very hard experience. Since I had never taught Arabic as a foreign language in an American university, I tried to apply what I had learned about Arabic structure in Moroccan schools. The teaching environment there, however, was completely different. The students were all Moroccans and they came to class with Berber or the Moroccan dialect or both. The assigned books dealt with Moroccan history, geography, religion and culture. In fact, when I got accepted into a U.S. University and was assigned to teach Arabic, I had the intention to apply what I learned from Moroccan schools about Arabic to the classes I taught in that American University. Unfortunately, it did not work. Through participation in workshops and orientations that I found that teaching Arabic as a foreign language requires a different approach and methodology within a U.S. context.

During my graduate training, and as part of my professional experiences, I was fortunate enough to teach Arabic at Middlebury College in Summer 2005. I also had the opportunity to teach Arabic in Summer Cooperative African Language Institute (SCALI), which is an intensive language program. My professional experience as an instructor in such intensive programs has provided me with a broad view that was useful in bringing life examples into my teaching and assisting students with projects and assignments.

Through my participation as an instructor and as a teaching assistant, I honed my skills in preparing syllabi and developing and teaching online course materials. I further

improved my confidence and knowledge base in teaching and facilitating courses when I earned a Graduate Teaching Certificate from University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, a program that prepares graduate students to be effective teachers. I also had the opportunity to attend many professional development seminars about teaching offered at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. I also had the opportunity to attend the National African Language Resource Center (NALRC) in Madison in 2004, to participate actively in teaching the skills of reading and listening in the African language program. All this has earned me the recognition of being on the UIUC “Incomplete List of Instructors Rated Outstanding by their Students” every semester I taught, and earning Henry Kahane Award in 2003 and 2007 from the Department of Linguistics for outstanding teaching assistant in non-western languages.

Recruiting study participants

In fall 2006, I conducted a survey of questionnaires and gave it to 141 students of all Arabic levels (see appendices A and B). There were 4 levels of the elementary level, two intermediate classes and one advanced level. The aim of the survey was to study the background and interests of the students taking the Arabic language classes at the university where this research was conducted, what their majors are, and to determine who among these students would be willing to participate in a future study to be approved under separate application to the Institutional Review Board. Questions asked provided insights into the reasons and motivations for learning Arabic. Students provided responses to eight questions and those willing to participate in a future study were asked to provide contact information. All students’ answers were tabulated and priority in

section was given to students who showed their willingness to continue taking Arabic in Fall 2007.

The ages of the students varied from 19 to 32. They were males and females. They came from different backgrounds. Some were from European origin while others were from Asian or African descent. This diversity was reflected not only in the age and origin of the students, but also in the departments they came from. There were different majors such as mathematics, anthropology, physics, international studies, religious studies, history, Middle Eastern culture, business, chemistry, political science and international studies, biology, French literature, engineering, psychology, Spanish, liberal arts, economics, comparative literature, and sociology. The question about whether the students spoke any Arabic or any of its dialects before enrolling in the Arabic program showed that the majority of students had no background at all nor did any member of their families speak it. People who answered positively were from Arab descent. However, these students admitted that they had a broken command of Arabic. One student explained that she learned some Algerian Arabic expressions from her husband who is Algerian. Another student from Bengali descent explained that her uncle lived in Saudi Arabia for ten years and that her father took Arabic in high school.

When students were asked about whether they took another language besides Arabic and English, some of them pointed out that they had been exposed to some European languages such as French, Spanish and German. Other students from South Asian backgrounds stated that they learned Urdu. Three students said that they had learned Hebrew.

It is also important to note that there were different reasons which prompted students to learn Arabic. Four students argued that they were learning it for religious interests. Some were learning it for political reasons. Ten students who expressed this political and job related reason for learning Arabic were enlisted in the army and they wanted to know how to speak with the Iraqis when they went back to Iraq. A male student at the age of 25 in the intermediate level stated that his reasons for learning Arabic were “Experience in Iraq, interest in doing humanitarian work in Arabic speaking countries....” Other students attributed their learning of Arabic to curiosity. They wanted to know how difficult Arabic is. A student wrote that he wanted to know whether Arabic was more difficult than Hebrew or vice versa. Other students attributed their enrolment in the Arabic program to career goals and as a requirement for graduation. It is important to note that the majority of students learning Arabic were non Muslims unlike the case 10 years ago when most of the students enrolled in the Arabic program were from Islamic heritage.

Many students expressed their willingness to pursue studying Arabic. However, many advanced level students noted they would stop taking Arabic classes in spring 2007. Fall 2007 students could not be generated as subsequent subjects as I was teaching the high advanced Arabic level (i.e., Arab 407). The impossibility of the registered students in my class to be involved in this research project was a good reason not to rely on this level to recruit the six students for my future study, which is reported here. In fact, the recruitment of the six participating students was most and foremost based on the availability of the student in both spring 2007 and fall 2007 semesters. Students who showed seriousness in participating in this project were given more priority. Students

who voiced their uncertainty of enrollment were eliminated from the study. Students who enrolled in the classes I taught were also eliminated. To guard this research project against any stereotypical judgments based on race or gender, both female and male students were given the same priority. The students were of different backgrounds and religions.

Final recruited participants

In order to meet the selection criteria and achieve with a sufficient range of variation and important issues in this study, I recruited six participants: three male students (Adam, John, and Raj) and three female students (Sara, Dana, and Kate). Participating students are referred to by pseudonyms. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 19 years. The average number of years that they had studied foreign languages in secondary school before studying at the university ranged from 2 to 3 years. Dana had studied the longest, whereas the other students had studied Arabic the shortest length of time (2 years). They all studied foreign languages in high schools and all of them were in at the intermediate level of Arabic with different majors. All of them took Arabic in the previous semesters, with the course grades ranging from A to B-. Adam, Dana, and Sara were the ones who received grade A. John and Raj received B and Kate is the one who received the lowest grade (B-). Table 1 summarizes students' foreign languages literacy and practices and field of specialization:

Table 1

Students' Foreign Language Learning Literacy and Academic Background Information

Features	Students' pseudonyms					
	Dana	Sara	Kate	Adam	Raj	John
Age	19	18	19	18	18	18
Major	International Studies	Political Science	International Studies	Anthropology	International Studies	Political Science
Ethnicity	Arabic	Pakistani and Italian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Indian	Caucasian
Foreign Languages Spoken and Level of fluency	Palestinian Arabic (good) Spanish (fair)	Spanish (fluent)	French (fair)	Spanish (fluent)	Hindi (fluent)	Spanish (fluent)
		Urdu (fair)		German (low)	French (low)	German (low)
		Pashtu (low)		Hindi (fair)		
		French (fair)				
Number of years learning Standard Arabic	3	2	2	2	2	2
Perception of Arabic as a Semitic language	Difficult in speaking	Difficult	Difficult	Difficult	Difficult	Difficult

Further details and characteristics of the participants are presented in the findings section.

Data Source and Data Collection

To ensure the validity of the findings of the study, I used questionnaires, interviews, observation, and think-aloud protocols as data collection methods. The information in table 2 summarizes analytical procedure by research questions and data sources:

Table 2

Analytical Procedures by Research Questions and Data Sources

Research Questions	Data Resource		
	Interviews	Classroom Observations	Assessment
What are the foreign languages history, literacy and practices of these 6 students?	<p>Conduct interviews with the students.</p> <p>Ask students how they had learned to read, listen, speak and write in the languages they spoke.</p> <p>Ask them what characterizes a good speaker, writer, listener, and reader of a language.</p> <p>Conduct 3 interviews with students, and 1 interview with the teacher</p>	<p>Observe students in class.</p> <p>Look for how students participated in class. How they completed homework and assignments</p>	<p>Examine students' answers to the interview questions</p>

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Research Questions	Data Resource		
	Interviews	Classroom Observations	Assessment
What are the challenges that students face in learning Arabic?	<p>Conduct 3 interviews with students, and 1 interview with the teacher</p> <p>Ask students about their perception of the curriculum, the book and the teaching materials used in class/ how they get support from their teacher/ which learning skill they find more challenging/ strengths and weaknesses of their teacher/ whether the teacher uses Arabic or English in teaching/ whether the teacher demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the subject.</p> <p>Interview the teacher about his experience in teaching/ about the difficulties students mostly find in learning Arabic/ about the book assigned and the teaching materials/ about the strengths and weakness of the students/ about the number of quizzes assigned during the semester/ About the grading system and students' grades.</p>	<p>Conduct 10-17 class observations.</p> <p>Observe students as they participate in class/ as they do drill and classroom activities individually and in groups.</p> <p>Observe the classroom as a context for learning and testing</p> <p>Look for formal learning processes/ what is taught in class/ how it is taught/ which language used in instruction/ interaction patterns (students/students and teacher/ students interaction)/ opportunities for students to use Arabic in class.</p>	<p>Analyze students' responses to assigned test.</p> <p>Examine students' homework, quizzes and exams.</p> <p>Assess the book and teaching materials.</p>

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Research Questions	Data Resource		
	Interviews	Classroom Observations	Assessment
What factors influence Arabic learning and teaching?	<p>Conduct 3 interviews with the students and one interview with the teacher.</p> <p>Ask the students about classroom management/ teacher's organization/ tests design and level of difficulty.</p> <p>Ask students about their attitudes towards Arabs and the Arabic language/ their motivation in class/ whether they feel nervous during exams/ whether they take the exam in comfortable classroom context/ about the level of difficulty of tests and their design/ test length/ whether they prefer take home or in class exams.</p> <p>Interview the teacher about the tests design and construct/ ask about the length and validity of the tests/ about students' scores in tests taken in class and take home exams/ students participation and motivation in class/ students' absence/ punctuality/ their seriousness/ about the physical surroundings in class (light, noise, comfort, and so forth)</p>	<p>Conduct 10-17 observations</p> <p>Observe students participation in class.</p> <p>Observe the organization of the classroom and physical surrounding such as light and comfort in class/ class suitability for exam taking/ whether there is any distracting noise inside and outside the classroom/ students interaction patterns/ observe students taking exam.</p> <p>Observe teacher teaching and proctoring students during exams.</p> <p>Observe the teacher's behavior towards the students</p>	<p>Examine students' responses to the interview questions.</p> <p>Assess the assigned test.</p>

Table 2 is a summative display of what data sources were used, and how to analyze the data to answer each research question. The complete details of the data sources and data collection procedures are described as follows:

Assessment (test specification)

General description (GD). The test was designed to demonstrate the ability in comprehending and producing Modern Standard Arabic accepted at the intermediate level. It laid special emphasis on assessing the ability to use knowledge of Modern Standard Arabic for different communicative purposes rather than assessing knowledge of the language system (i.e., grammar) itself. The test consisted of two tasks (Reading and Writing). The aim of the reading tests was to assess the students' ability to read and understand authentic texts independently, under timed conditions. The aim of the writing test, on the other hand, was to assess the students' ability to express their thought in writing.

A range of different tasks and activities in the test provided students with more opportunities to demonstrate their Arabic knowledge and performance.

Description of the test takers. The test takers were 6 American students (3 female and 3 male) learning Arabic. The students were in intermediate Arabic level.

General objectives. To examine the participants' level of Arabic proficiency and investigate the problems they face in learning.

Specific objectives.

1. To assess students' competence in Arabic
2. To assess the students' ability to comprehend and understand authentic texts independently.

3. To assess the students' ability to perform writing tasks related to everyday life and work.
4. To know the learning strategies that students used in reading and writing.
5. To find out the effectiveness of think aloud while reading and how students respond to prompting questions about what they read.
6. How to express oneself in an organized manner.
7. How to support ideas with arguments in writing.
8. How to express ideas coherently.
9. How the students were able to understand the Arabic text.
10. How to support ideas with examples in writing.
11. How they organize their ideas.
12. Ability to organize thoughts into a thorough and coherent narrative structure.
13. How to follow the convention of spelling and punctuation.
14. To know which learning skill students found more difficult.
15. Ability to use appropriate learning strategies.

Prompt Attributes (PA). The participants were asked to read a text loudly and note down any idea that came to their minds at the time of reading. Then they were asked to answer the questions in a written form based on what they read. The participants were also asked to write a short essay. The topic is as close as possible to activities likely to be encountered in everyday life.

Description of the Test

Reading

1. Instruction was given in English.
2. The text had no title.

3. The language was academic and simple.
4. The readability level matches the participants' level.
5. The content was appropriate for intermediate level.
6. Short answer questions.
7. Students read aloud and they could stop the task at any time to think about the ideas that come to their minds.
8. Multiple-choice questions
9. The length of the text was approximately 228 words.
10. The reading and answering time was 60 minutes.
11. The participants were allowed to take notes while reading.
12. The use of dictionaries was not allowed.

Writing

1. The instruction was given in English.
2. The participants were asked to write a short essay of approximately 300 words in Modern Standard Arabic.
3. The content was appropriate for intermediate Arabic class.
4. Participants were asked to pay attention to linguistic requirements such as the style.
5. No Arabic dialect was allowed.
6. The essay should be coherent and organized.
7. No use of dictionary was allowed.
8. The participants had 60 minutes to finish this task.

Participant observation

Observations of the teacher and the students took place in the classroom and lab. I attended classes where the participants of this research were enrolled. The class meetings

took place from Monday to Friday. As I was interested in eliciting more information from the students, I became more immersed in the research by meeting the participants every Friday from 3 to 5. The sessions took place over a 10 week period. It was a group activity that required from the students to come up with questions to the class about what they did not comprehend in class. It was a good opportunity to follow the participants' progress and see how they interacted. I chose to observe this activity every Friday because the participants felt more comfortable to discuss the challenges they faced in learning Arabic at the group meeting. During this group meeting, I volunteered to assist them on Arabic related work. I had the opportunity to take an in-depth look how they managed to write, speak, read and listen, and what strategies they used. The advantage of the regular and Friday meetings enabled me to record what I observed in fieldnotes.

Interviews

I interviewed students and the teacher individually. Additionally, I had the opportunity to interview the students' former teachers. I practiced the following sequences when I conducted the interviews. I first interviewed the students to get some sense about their basic background and literacy practices in Arabic. The speakers were first asked simple questions that required them to talk about their family background. I asked them questions that represented areas of special interest or familiarity to them. Generally speaking, the students were asked to provide information about the reasons and motives for learning Arabic. They were also asked about their learning history in the past and how fluent they were. In addition, they were asked to tell their strengths and weaknesses in learning Arabic. The sample chief questions that I asked students revolved around the challenges that they faced in speaking, reading, listening and writing, and

what characterized a good learner in these skills. From the sample interview queries, I was looking for the methods the students received in Arabic learning, classroom activities, and how they cope with the difficulties they faced. Sample interview questions are provided in appendix C.

I also interviewed the students' current teacher. The interview was conducted after I finished with the students. The aim of the interview is to find out how many orientations and workshops the teacher has been through. The teacher was asked to provide information about his experience in teaching Arabic. He was also asked about topics related to the teaching methodology he was using in class and the challenges that his students faced and how he helped them to overcome those challenges. Questions about the teacher's perception of the book assigned were also asked.

Think-aloud assessment

The Think Aloud is a method to gather data in a range of social sciences (Ericsson & Simon 1984). It involves participants thinking aloud as they are performing a task. The think aloud instruction warns the participants against explanation and verbal description. Students were instructed how to answer the questions without explanation. They were asked not to describe or explain what they were doing. Rather, they were asked to simply verbalize the information they attended to. Ericsson and Simon pointed out that it is important to give participants trials on these warm-up activities until they are able to make verbal reports. Generally speaking, the think aloud method is considered to be more objective in that participants report how they go about completing reading, listening, speaking and writing tasks rather than interpreting or justifying their actions. It is an

effective data source to examine the students' thinking processes and strategies in the four language learning skills.

Several researchers recommend that students should be given practice in the think aloud procedure prior to using it for data collection. Before I embarked on collecting data, I explained to the participants what the think aloud method is. I gave them a handout explaining the technical details about it. Before the think aloud session, warm up trials were used through which participants were given trials on these warm-up tasks until they were able to make verbal reports without confounding them with explanations and justifications that would influence their cognitive processes. They were instructed that the main point was not to explain, but to report what occurred in their minds while they were taking the reading test. Students were encouraged to verbalize their thinking with the words: "tell me what you are thinking about" whenever they visibly paused or were silent for an extended period of time. In order to remind the students that they were to keep me continually informed of their thoughts, I asked them if there were any other thoughts that came to mind that they did not say aloud. After every session, I asked students some prompting questions. These questions were not traditional comprehension questions that assessed the content of the task performed. Rather they were critical questions about the content of the passage. Examples of these questions are: To what extent have you read or thought about the ideas in this text or topic prior to your participation in this project?" "If you had to choose to modify the test, what would you modify?" "What is your impression about the passage and comprehension questions? Did you like them?" "How would you improve the test?" The sessions were audio recorded and coded for categories for later analysis.

Rating

Generally speaking, there are two types of ratings, namely holistic and analytic ratings (Hamp-Lyons, 1995). In holistic scale, the number of bands are first decided (e.g., 1-5 or A-E) and under each band a detailed description or sometimes examples of what kind of performances are expected at each level are provided. In analytic scale, on the other hand, the researcher breaks down the scale into desirable performances expected by the assessment context. Each component is then rated separately. This could reduce the potential bias of giving more weight on one performance component over another and this might be the reason why analytic rating tends to be more reliable and preferred. However, holistic rating can be reliable too mainly if the raters are well calibrated during rater-training workshops. Scoring reliability of this research was determined by two raters rating all tests. The second test rater, a native speaker of Arabic and teacher of Arabic in the Arabic program was provided with copy of the coding procedures for errors and was asked to classify the misreading and misspelling into their appropriate categories. Validation was done by having an independent teacher in the Arabic program view the tests.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data obtained from questionnaires, observation, interviews, think aloud assessment, and fieldnotes followed the method recommended by methodologists such as Bogdan and Bicklen (2003). I coded the data and searched throughout the data for regularities and patterns as well as for the topics they covered. I wrote down words and phrases to represent these topics and develop them in a list of

coding categories. After generating preliminary coding categories, I tried to assign them to the data in order to discover their usefulness. These codes encompassed topics for which I had the most substantiation to explore. After I developed the coding categories, I made a list and assigned each one a number as this is helpful in facilitating memorization of the coding system. This exercise resulted in different categories such as reasons and goals for learning Arabic and the problems faced in learning it. The choice of these categories is due to their frequent use by the respondents. I also looked for patterns and relationship from categories.

Chapter 4

Findings

Findings From Interviews

The findings of the study are organized according to the themes that emerged from the research questions. First I will present a description of the students' backgrounds and histories about their literacy learning experiences and practices. This information is very important as it provides some evidence for transfer of learning skills between previous learned languages and Arabic. Also, a presentation of the students' demographic backgrounds and foreign language learning experiences provides adequate information about the linguistic difficulties that the participants are facing in learning Arabic. The next section deals with the difficulties and challenges that students faced in learning Arabic. Finally, I will talk about the teacher's experience and teaching methodology. More specifically, I will show how teaching practices impacted learning by investigating the learning environment, students' interaction in class, students' voice in class and the general training and hiring of Arabic instructors. In a nutshell, the findings consist of three parts, which are developed around the central research questions: Students' History and Practices of Foreign Language Learning; Inherent Difficulties in the Arabic Language; Problems Inherent in Teaching Arabic. Where appropriate, relevant narratives from the data are used to illustrate a point.

Part 1: Student History and Practices of Foreign Language Learning

When asked about their history of foreign languages and literacy, all the participants confirmed that they had studied a foreign language before. Raj acquired Hindi at home. He said “I am a native Hindi speaker from birth and then I learned English in elementary school in India up till the age of ten and then moved to USA and was very much thrown into perfecting my English and I think I did that transition very well.” Raj also pointed out that he took French in high school and “could carry on broken conversations,” meaning that he could not carry on conversations normally. When he was asked about his failure and success in French, he argued that he did well in exams, but he did not continue studying it in college.

Dana took four years of Spanish in high school. She argued that she could read and write. However, she had difficulties in the speaking skill. She attributed this difficulty to the teacher. She said: “Honestly, I think the most difficult part in learning Spanish was the speaking. I mean I was taught by a non-Hispanic teacher. So I feel like I did not reach the potential in high school and there was a little interaction.”

Adam also took Spanish for five years in high school. He said that he was relatively fluent in Spanish. He claimed that he took the National Spanish Exam and was ranked the fourth in the nation and first in the region. In addition, Adam took Hindi for two semesters and taught himself German. Similarly, Sara excelled in Spanish in high school and said she could speak it fluently. She reported that she understood Urdu and Pashtu more than she spoke them. She also claimed to speak Italian. Sara saw herself as a good language learner. She said, “I realized I have a natural ability to understand and speak languages. They come naturally more than other subjects I study. I found

languages sort of easier after taking Spanish.” When she was asked about her success and failure in learning foreign languages, Sara pointed out that she found Italian very similar to Spanish and did not face many problems in learning it. The only problem she faced was in the reading skill. Pashtu was difficult for her in both reading and writing comprehension, but not in speaking.

Kate’s experience with foreign language learning was not that successful. She took French in high school. When asked about how she found learning French, she admitted that she faced some difficulties and challenges. She had the same experience in studying Spanish and Japanese.

The students came to Arabic classes equipped with a background of foreign language learning. They expressed different reasons for learning Arabic. The finding confirmed Belnap’s (1987) and Husseinali’s (2006) studies about the reasons for learning Arabic in U.S. Some of the reasons that motivated students to learn Arabic in U.S. are learning the literature and culture, talking to native speakers of Arabic, their passion for learning foreign languages and also for religious and political reasons. More specifically, Sara chose to learn Arabic because of religious reasons. She said “I chose to learn Arabic because of religious and professional reasons. For religious reasons because I am a Muslim and for professional reasons if I find a job and continue with Arabic.” Adam pointed out that he was curious to know about Islam and wanted to read the Quran. He also contended that speaking Arabic would secure a job for him in the future. John, Raj and Kate also expressed similar sentiments about the importance of Arabic in the job market. Dana is the only participant of Arab descent. For her Arabic is very important to communicate with the rest of her family members. She argued that “being from Palestine,

I feel when I go back home I should be able to speak Arabic with the people there instead of embarrassing myself.” Dana went further in claiming that Arabic is part of her culture and religion. However, students’ confidence and success in foreign languages seemed not to extend to Arabic. Students expressed their nervousness about learning Arabic because they were not exposed to it in high school.

Students’ first perceptions about Arabic

Beliefs and attitudes have a strong effect on learning a language. Arabic has a reputation among the American students for being difficult to learn (Elkhafaifi, 2005). The participants reported the anxiety and fear they experienced in the first days of learning Arabic. Some of them even pointed out that they were thinking of dropping the class. Generally, attrition among students of Arabic tends to be high despite the laudable motivation students showed in the first days of learning Arabic. It is important to conclude that the belief that Arabic is the most difficult language combined with feelings of anxiety may cause Arabic to be an exotic language for U.S. students. These students’ history of foreign languages did not involve any Semitic language learning experience. This helps to account for why they were nervous about taking Arabic. When asked about whether they still remembered the first days of learning Arabic, all the students expressed how nervous they were. Kate said, “I was a kind of nervous.” Adam pointed out that he was scared. Sara argued that she was “scared seeing people speak Arabic. Everything is completely different from English when you open the book, when you start a page. I was scared.” John expressed the same sentiments and was wowed by the script. He said, “I was scared and nervous. I was not sure what to expect. It is a different language. The alphabet looked weird. I felt like a first grader learning the English alphabet.” Dana,

however, was not that surprised when she first started Arabic. She said, “It was a very important experience for me. I have always heard Arabic spoken in a certain way. So to hear it spoken in the standard manner is so different from what I am used to.”

Students’ strengths and weaknesses in learning Arabic

When asked about the strengths and weaknesses that they faced in learning Arabic, the students provided different answers. Dana, for example, admitted that the most difficult part she faced in learning Arabic was the speaking part. For her, “Speaking does not come naturally, maybe because it is the standard which is different from the colloquial. You know, Arabic is not coming naturally as I want.” Dana also complained that she had difficulties in listening comprehension. She attributed this difficulty in listening and speaking to the way native speakers speak Arabic. She said, “For native speakers I feel like they go too fast, but for them for sure it is not fast.”

Adam, however, saw his strengths in grammar and his weaknesses in learning the vocabulary. He explained that “my vocabulary in Arabic is very hard to remember because it is not like English. The alphabet makes it very hard to memorize.” He also saw listening as the most difficult part in learning Arabic. For him, reading was not as difficult as listening as he could figure out the meaning of words by guessing, a task that he could not perform when engaging in conversation or listening to someone speak. Speaking was not that difficult for him either. He claimed that he “can speak clumsily and say something and probably people would figure out what I am saying.” However, Adam found writing in Arabic to be difficult. Teaching Arabic vocabulary out of the context constituted a difficult task for Adam. He liked his teacher’s involvement of vocabulary in teaching. However, he complained that the vocabulary taught in the lab

was completely different from the vocabulary used in the book. He also reported that he did not have many assignments in the Arabic program as was the case in other language programs.

Raj had been learning Arabic for four semesters and he stated that he usually had problems in comprehending complex sentences and grammatical concepts. He also pointed out that writing and listening were the most challenging skills in learning Arabic. Reading, on the other hand, did not present any challenge to him. He made it clear that “in reading you can touch and figure out words here and there and try to piece them together which works a lot better.” One of the difficulties that he faced in listening was that he fell behind and unable to catch up with the class if he paused and wondered upon the meaning of the teacher’s words or sentences used in class. He said, “I have been listening to the instructor and then I catch two words that I understand and by the time I try to understand those words and piece them together, he already moves on. I just feel so stuck in these two words I caught.” Raj never talked to his teacher about the difficulties he was facing in learning Arabic. However, he shared them with his friend who could not help him to ease this difficulty either.

Sara claimed that although she was exposed to different languages and had experience in learning foreign languages, this did not help her in overcoming the difficulties she was facing in reading in Arabic. She said that “reading is difficult in front of people. When I am alone I can read.” She also claimed that writing was her strength as she could write quickly and with ease. When I asked her how she found listening and speaking, she argued that she did not have any problem in these skills especially if the words and sentences were explained or seen before. She said, “I do not have a problem

with comprehending things after they touched my head. You know, I figure out the sound of the word if I am familiar with it or saw it before. If I have never heard before that will be obviously more difficult.” Sara complained about having a different teacher every semester as it took time to get used to the style of teaching and the teacher’s accent. She also expressed her concern about the scarcity of vocabulary practices in her Arabic class. In comparison with other languages classes she took, Sara confirmed that vocabulary was badly taught in her Arabic class.

Kate identified listening and speaking skills as areas of weakness in learning Arabic. Like other students, Kate never talked with her teacher about the challenges that she was facing in learning Arabic. Kate observed that the teacher talked very fast. She also noticed that there was a lot of focus on reading and speaking, but not much on grammar. In addition, she preferred to have a well- organized syllabus. She recalled that the Japanese and French syllabi were very structured and this helped the students to know what to do and have in advance. Kate liked this type of syllabi organization and hoped to see the same in the Arabic program. Kate also admitted that she worked alone and never stopped by her teacher’s office for assistance. She liked the book assigned in class as it involved more exercises. Her concern about the book, however, was grammar. She found grammar not well explained in the book. When it came to assignments, she pointed out that not enough assignments were given in her Arabic class.

When asked about his failure and success in learning Arabic, John stated that he was better in reading and listening than speaking and writing. He attributed this to the amount of time he could take to figure out the words meaning in reading and listening. For listening, for instance, he claimed that he could stop, pause, rewind the tape recorder

and slow down. For speaking, John saw that it was challenging as it did not have any visual aides. He saw himself as a visual learner. He saw that his teacher laid too much emphasis on learning vocabulary that the class ended up not using.

Learning strategies

What follows is the presentation of learning strategies that the participants reported they used in learning Arabic. It should be noted that students' responses to the question of how they read, write, listen, and whether they had the opportunity to use Arabic showed that they had different approaches in learning Arabic. They also expressed different opinions with regard to the question of what characterizes a good speaker, good listener, good writer, and good reader. Some specific examples from individual students' answers to the question of learning strategies will be illustrated as supporting evidence.

John saw himself as a decent reader. He claimed that he usually comprehended the content of the passage using the following strategy in reading. He broke the passage into paragraphs and read each paragraph separately. He said, "I will do my first paragraph or two to figure out its content, and then move to the second paragraph to decipher what it means, too." When he was asked about whether he looked up every word in the text, he argued that he did not understand all words, but just grasped the whole meaning of the paragraph by resorting to guessing. For him a good reader was one who could read through the paragraph, comprehend the general ideas and knew half the words. He also contended that a good reader was the one who could answer the passage questions based on reading without looking words up in the dictionary.

John did not see himself as a good writer because he could not organize his thoughts in writing. He reported that writing was easy for him in English, but not in Arabic. Arabic represented a challenge for him in writing complex sentences. When asked what characterized a good writer for him, he stressed the organization of thoughts in writing. For him a good writer was someone who could write in an organized way.

When asked about the strategies he followed in listening, John explained that he would listen to the whole text in order to figure out what it meant and then listened to each sentence. He regarded this strategy as an effective one and he saw himself as a good listener. Therefore, a good listener for him was the one who was able to pick up words and phrases and understand their meanings. He confirmed that this mainly worked in the lab where he had full access to the text. However, he explained that he found it very hard to comprehend his teacher when he was talking. He said, “As far as listening, the teacher just speaks in Arabic and I cannot stop and rewind. It was hard for me. I just pick up words I know here and there.”

Adam complained about the environment where Arabic was taught. He said that he practiced his Arabic only in class with his classmates and the teacher. His interaction with native speakers would not improve his Arabic as they spoke colloquial Arabic, which he considered not very important to him as he was interested in learning Standard Arabic. So, he had the opportunity to use Arabic in class only. Adam did not consider himself a good speaker of Arabic. For him, a good speaker was “someone who can speak without hesitation and lead a normal conversation without problems.”

When asked about the learning strategies he followed in learning Arabic, Adam argued that he usually skipped words and got the general idea from the words he knew.

For Adam, a good reader was the one who read, got all details and kept them in mind. A good writer for him was one who got ideas across clearly and provided the right reaction and emotion in the reader. He also noted that he was a decent listener. A good listener for him was one who paid attention and understood what people said. Unlike other students who could not stop their teachers when they did not understand, Adam did stop his Arabic teacher for clarification in class.

Adam reported that he did his best to use Arabic with his friends in class. He visited the mosque to meet native speakers of Arabic to practice his Arabic. However, he admitted that his attempt ended in failure and frustration because only the spoken Arabic varieties were used in the mosque, which he could not speak nor understand. When asked about what characterized a good speaker of Arabic, Adam said that a good speaker could practice the words and get used to saying things in a certain order and certain ways. He pointed out that he learned new vocabulary this semester, but rarely used them in class.

In contrast, Sara, who considered herself a good reader, argued that she did not skim and summarize. Rather, she read everything once and looked for context clues. The characteristics of a good reader for her were fluency, pronunciation and knowledge of the words and their meanings. She claimed that she demonstrated the effective use of strategies of reading in helping her read and figure out unknown words better. Sara considered herself a good writer, too. For her, a good writer was one who “knows how to put full sentences together and make it flow.” When asked how she wrote, she reported that she would resort to brainstorming first and wrote main ideas later when she was writing a report.

Sara seemed to follow a different listening strategy. She pointed out that she listened and then came back to the words she did not understand. A good listener for her was the one who could visualize what she or he heard, putting things together in coherent way. Sara thought that Arabic is a language that needs more exposure outside of the class. She compared Arabic and Spanish and saw that Arabic is a very difficult language if not practiced and used inside and outside of the class. She admitted that Arabic is not easy. She explained that “it is definitely not a language that you teach yourself. You need a formal instruction.”

Dana saw herself as an average reader. She read everything first then went back and finally skimmed. An excellent reader for her was someone who did not pause a lot, someone who read with less stress and more confidentiality. However, Dana admitted that she still had problems in writing. She said, “I think my writing is still weak.” When asked about the writing strategies she was using, she pointed out that she wrote whatever came to her mind. She was not pleased with her writing skill. She compared her writing to a first grader’s. A good writer for her was “someone who writes very smoothly, they can elaborate on the thought. They have a good knowledge of the vocabulary that they can inject in their writing using good semantics and grammar. Definitely, someone who can elaborate on the thoughts not just uses very simple thoughts, very detailed descriptions.”

Raj read everything to comprehend the text, then caught the words and tried to figure out what directions the conversation was going to take and what the main idea was. Raj saw himself as a decent reader. For him, a good reader would be “somebody who can read effectively, not only fast, but comprehend 70% of what they are reading.” He

believed that skimming and summarizing are the characteristics of a good reader. He also saw himself as a decent writer. He believed that a good writer was somebody who saw a question or a topic and automatically started writing about it without having to think much about it.

Raj followed an approach completely different from the other students in listening. He explained that he listened once and then went back from section to section. He was confident that the learning strategy he was following was good and helpful. A good listener for him was somebody who could understand 70% of what was being said and could pick up on the general idea of the conversation. In the meantime, Raj confirmed that he was not a good speaker of Arabic. He used Arabic only in class. He said, "I have no Arabic friends and even I do not think we will talk in Arabic outside of the class. It is kind of socially unacceptable not to talk English." What Raj wanted to convey here is that there was no environment where students could practice their Arabic. However, Raj pointed out that there were cases when he made a lot of efforts to get his point across. Raj thought that a good speaker could get the point across if they wanted. He gave an example which showed that a good speaker's characteristics were clarity and coherence in their speech.

Kate's reading strategies seemed to differ from the other students. She tried to go over the words she did not know and explain them. She resorted to translation to explain words. She saw herself as an average reader. For her, a good reader was one who grasped and knew the meaning of words in the text or figured out their meanings from the context. Kate saw herself as an average writer. She usually wrote what came to her mind. A good writer for her had a good style, good vocabulary, and good use of grammar and

sentence structure. Kate also reported that she took notes in listening and tried to select the words she knew. She listened first and then went over the questions later. A good listener for her was one who grasped what was said in every single word. Kate complained about the lack of an environment where she could practice her Arabic. Kate saw that she had problems in pronunciation. When asked about what characterized a good speaker, she stressed good vocabulary, pronunciation and good use of grammar. Kate observed that the teacher spoke very fast. She liked to have more assignments that would not be graded. She recalled that the Japanese and French syllabi were more structured and organized than Arabic ones. She also noticed that group work is discouraged in class.

Part 2: Inherent Difficulties in the Arabic Language

The six students embarked on studying Arabic with little or no knowledge of the language. They were surprised to find that they had to master new writing and new syntactic, phonological and morphological system, which is completely different from the system of English and the languages (especially commonly taught languages) that they were exposed to in high school.

Difficulties inherent in students' writing

My findings suggest that each of the six students represented different degrees of writing proficiency. The findings demonstrated that the less proficient writers experienced a high level of anxiety and frustration, and did not show complete control of the Arabic language structure. A closer examination of the students' linguistic system used in the writing task showed that the linguistic system of the first language (L1) prevailed. In what follows, I will present examples from students' categories of linguistic

transfer, sentence complexity, and style. I will also talk about the difficulties students faced in writing.

Linguistic transfer

The six students demonstrated transfer from English to Arabic in their writing, resulting in grammatical mistakes that created coherence problems. For example, in the essay where he wrote about himself and his family, John wrote the following sentence: نحن نساكن في شمبين مدينة, which literally means “we live in Champaign city”. Yet, this is incorrect structure. The correct form should be نحن نساكن في مدينة شمبين.

Kate, Raj, Adam, John, and Sara demonstrated similar problems. Kate wrote the following examples: “أحب شقتي أسكن في” and “سأحصل العمل” which literally mean “I like my apartment I live in” and “I will get the work,” respectively. The correct form of the above sentences should be: “أحب شقتي التي أسكن فيها” and “سأحصل على العمل.”

When talking about his trip to Turkey, Raj wrote the following sentences: “أنا زرت المسجد سليمانية وآخر مكان” and “أنا أكلت في كثير مطاعم” meaning “I visited the Suleymaniye Mosque and other places” and “I ate in many restaurants,” respectively. Note the reverse order of “other” and “place,” which yields ungrammatically. Note also the omission of the preposition “من” and the use of the indefiniteness instead of the definite “ال” in the noun “مطاعم.” The correct forms of the above sentences should be the following: “أنا زرت مسجد السلمانية و أماكن أخرى” and “أنا أكلت في كثير من المطاعم”.

Adam wrote “أريد أن أشجع علاقات صديقية بين الشرق و الغرب” and it seems that Adam wants to say: “I want to encourage a friendly relationship between the East and the West, using the adjective “صديقية” which renders his sentence ungrammatical in Arabic. John also demonstrated similar problems in his writing. He wrote the following:

عندي عربية صفوف الآن, literally meaning “I have Arabic classes now.” Note the linguistic transfer of the adjective “عربية” which is misplaced and put before the noun. The correct form should be “عندي صفوف عربية الآن” where the adjective عربية follows the noun صفوف that it modifies.

Sara also demonstrated similar problems but less frequently than the other students. It is common to find in her writing sentences such as “عندما أنا في البيت” and “عندما أنا في شيكاغو” meaning “when I was at home” and “when I was in Chicago,” respectively. Yet the two sentences are ungrammatical. The use of the verb “كان” is obligatory to convey the same meaning. Therefore, the grammatical form of the above sentences should be “عندما كنت في البيت” and “عندما كنت في شيكاغو.”

Unlike the other students, Dana did not demonstrate linguistic transfer from English to Arabic. Rather, she demonstrated linguistic transfer from Palestinian Arabic to Standard Arabic, especially with respect to word order and the dual form. It is important to note that the SVO order predominates in Arabic dialects. With plural or dual subjects, a plural verb is always used when the referent is human. The subject is always plural whether the word order is VSO or SVO, unlike the case in Standard Arabic where there is no number concord in VSO sentences with a human subject. The verb is always singular and agrees with the subject in gender only (i.e., the verb is either masculine or feminine singular, although the subject is plural). When Dana wrote about her mother’s daily activities, she wrote “هي وجدتي دائما يطبخون و يعملون” literally meaning “My grandmother and she always cook and work.” Note that a plural verb is used with dual subjects, which renders the sentence ungrammatical. Sentences such as these with the dual subject and plural verb are allowed in Arabic dialects and not Standard Arabic. Therefore, the correct

form should be the following: “هي و جدتي دائما تطبخان و تعملان” where the verb concords with the subject in duality and gender. Since the relevant structures of both Arabic and English are different, students’ attempts to transfer structures from English to Arabic resulted in negative transfer. It is highly probable that this negative transfer gradually reduces over time.

Sentence complexity

Among the six students, Dana’s sentence structure was the most sophisticated. She elaborated her ideas using many long sentences. She also used complex and compound sentences joined by appropriate coordinators. Her writing involves appropriate use of vocabulary. However, Dana sometimes resorted to words used in oral conversation rather than written communication to express herself when she did not find the right words to do so in Standard Arabic.

Sara, Adam and John’s sentence structures displayed the following problems: (a) the use of simple sentences resulting from limited vocabulary, (b) lack of appropriate conjunctions, (c) the use of unclear terms resulting in awkwardness and ambiguity, (d) the use of short sentences. Similarly, Kate and Raj did not provide many details in writing. They admitted that finding the right word and spelling it in the right way was a very big challenge to them. Many students claim to have the ideas but neither the ability nor the skill in Arabic to express them. Students’ difficulties in Arabic writing include limited vocabulary, problems with organization of ideas, and deficiencies in the Arabic linguistic mechanisms necessary for coherence and persuasion.

Style

When analyzing students' styles, I looked at organization, word choice and elaboration of ideas and thoughts. I also focused on story development and series of events, focusing on beginning, sequence of events, and ending.

I noticed that students showed a range of rhetorical styles in their writing. Dana, for example, brought a kind of Arabic hospitality which is part of Arab culture into the piece when she talked about holidays. She reported the diversity of Palestinian people. She talked about how Palestinian Christians and Muslims celebrate holidays and how generous people they were. She was also able to talk about the hospitality of her parents and grandparents and how they felt happy to welcome guests to their home. Dana provided many details to tell her story and express her own feelings. Yet, her writing did not show any knowledge of metaphorical language. Unlike Dana, Raj, Sara, Adam, John, and Kate did not show any organization in their writing. Their writing lacked beginnings and endings. The event development was not detailed and the transition from one idea to the other was confusing to the reader to follow the logical order of the sentences.

Orthography difficulties

One of the major findings in the participants' writing tends to focus on the script and orthography. The preponderance of dots that differentiate letters in Arabic was challenging to the participants. Additions and omissions of dots were found in each student text. The students had differing difficulties in distinguishing between some letters mostly between soft and hard consonants. Students' writing showed letter substitution of ق with ك, ط with ت, ض with د, and ذ with ظ as the following examples show:

Translation	Correct form	Error
I live in Cairo.	أسكن في القاهرة.	أسكن في الكاهرة.
I have only one brother.	لي أخ واحد فقط.	لي أخ واحد فقط.
I traveled last summer.	سافرت في الصيف الماضي.	سافرت في الصيف المادي.
The food is delicious in this restaurant.	الأكل في هذا المطعم لذيذ جدا	الأكل في هذا المطعم لطيف جدا.

Figure 1. Difficulties inherent in students' writing

The similarity between the shapes of certain Arabic letters seemed to create problems in spelling for students. Also, letters with similar sounds were also confused such as “ء” with “هـ”, “م” with “ن”, and “ث” with “ش”. Some students also displayed bad handwriting, wrong letter shape and substituting or swapping a letter for another.

The characteristic spelling errors made by the students were addition, omission, and incorrect sound symbol association of letters. Errors in relation to the quality of handwriting were also clear. The majority of the students' handwriting was poor. It was also noted that segmentation errors consisted mostly of breaks in the cursive flow of the script. Segmentation errors also involved connecting letters which should not be connected. Surprisingly, Kate's writing displayed some errors such as connecting the letters "د" and "س" in أنا سأسدس or disconnecting the letters that should be connected such as بيبي instead of بيتي. Such common types of errors are made by students of elementary Arabic.

Difficulties stemming from grammar

Arabic presents certain difficulties for the learner whose native language is English. Contrary to English, adjectives in Arabic are always placed after the noun they modify and they must agree with them in gender, number, definiteness and case. Only the

presence or absence of the definite article ال distinguishes noun-adjective phrase from what is called جملة اسمية in Arabic. However, there is partial agreement between the noun and the adjective when the former is inanimate. In addition to this, the English linking verb *to be* is never expressed in Arabic. It was noted that this problem was more prevalent in students who had less experience with the Arabic language learning. Examples below show how the placement of adjective in Arabic challenged Kate in writing:

Text:

*أحب أن أدرس العربية. اللغة جميلة.

Transliteration: 'uHibbu an 'adrusa 'al- 'arabiyya. 'allughatu jamiil
 I-like.present to I-study.present def.Arabic def.language. nom pretty.masc.
 "I like to study Arabic. The language is pretty."

Text:

*صفوفي صعب.

Transliteration: Sufuufii Sa'b-un
 classes-my difficult-nom
 "My classes are difficult."

Text:

*أريد أن أعمل في شركة حيث كل لغات العالم مهمون في العمل.

Transliteration:

'uriidu 'an a'mal-a fii sharikat-in Haytu kullu lughati 'al 'aalam
 I- want-present to I work in company-acc where all-nom language def. world
 muhimmuun fii 'al-'amal
 important in def- work
 "I want to work in a company where all languages of the world are important at work."

Another feature that seemed to challenge the students learning Arabic was the grammatical concept of the root system or what is called الجذر in Arabic. In Arabic words that are related in meaning tend to be related in form as well in the sense that they have

the same consonants. A root is not a word, but a group of consonants usually three in number. The concept of the root caused tremendous confusion among U.S. students. Some of the important peculiarities of verbs in Arabic that seemed to challenge the students' comprehension in the root system are the internal vocalic changes in the verb.

Another major difficulty that students faced in learning Arabic was the difference between the different endings of the present tense. They could not differentiate between the default form, that is المضارع المرفوع and المضارع المنصوب which takes a final فتحة “fatHa” on most persons, and does not take the final ن on the pronouns أنت (2F. S), أنتم (2M.PI), and هم (3M.pl.). Sentences such as “*hum yuriiduuna an yadhhabuuna*” هم يريدون أن يذهبون and “*hal tuHibbiina 'an tusaafiriina*” هل تحبين أن تسافرين were very common in students writing.

Problems with VSO/SVO order and agreement

A central property of Standard Arabic VSO order is that the verb agrees with the post verb subject in gender and person only. An adequate account of agreement in Standard Arabic shows that there is one set of inflectional parameter for each word order. VSO shows agreement in gender and person between the subject and the verb. SVO order, on the other hand, shows complete agreement between the subject and the verb. Students confused the two. Below are some examples the students performed:

*يلعبون أصدقائي كل يوم.

Text:

Transliteration: *yal'abuuna 'aSdiqaa'ii kulla yawm
Play-3mp friends-my every day
“My friends play every day.”

Text:

*يذهبون الطلاب إلى الجامعة.

Transliteration:

*yadhhabuuna TTullab-u 'ilaa ljaami'a-ti
go-they def-student-nom to def-university-acc
“The students go to the university.”

Students did not face any problems in learning sentences which contained verb subject construction in the singular form. However, even though the grammatical rules for making duals and plurals in Arabic were explained in class, students had trouble understanding the dual and plural forms structures in Arabic. The problem is basically a lack of understanding and discriminating VSO and SVO structures.

Problem with case marking

The case marking system in Arabic also seemed to be challenging to students. Several categories of nouns in Arabic have a slightly different set of case endings: one ending for nominative (المرفوع) and another that serves as accusative (المنصوب) and oblique (المجرور). Students had trouble in understanding that the nouns and adjectives that fall in this category include dual endings ان/ين and masculine and feminine plural endings ات and ون/ين.

Problems with definiteness

Nouns in Arabic are inflected for state (definite and indefinite). The definite noun in Arabic takes the definite article *al*. However, when indefinite it takes no article and three case endings with final *-n* are displayed. For example, *al-bintu*, *al-binta*, *al-binti* “the girl” contrasts with *bint-un*, *bint-an*, *bint-in* “a girl”. However, definiteness gets more complex with proper nouns and *idafa* construction such as *kitaabu al-binti* (i.e., the girl’s book). More specifically, proper nouns and the first noun in *idafa* construction do not bear a definite article. The absence of the definite article does not necessarily mean

indefiniteness. Rather, they are considered definite in spite of the absence of an article.

The data showed that the students had difficulty in understanding the definiteness system in the *idafa* construction in that they reversed the definiteness requirement of the nouns.

For example, Raj wrote:

أنا زرت [...] والمسجد سليمانية...

The correct form should be مسجد السليمانية

Problems with the plural system

Students seemed to have difficulty in understanding the plural system in Arabic.

Unlike English which has only one regular plural pattern, Arabic displays more different regular patterns. Human plurals in Arabic are divided into three categories: broken

plurals, sound masculine plurals, and sound feminine plurals. Human sound masculine

plurals جمع المذكر السالم take a pair of endings that alternate according to grammatical

function: in the subject position ون is used and in others ين is used instead. Human sound

feminine plurals (جمع المؤنث) ات take the plural ending ات. In broken plurals (جمع التكسير) the

stem of the singular is “broken” by shifting the consonants into different vowel patterns.

The high proportion of noun plurals are largely irregular and it is unpredictable for

students to comprehend the plural form of some nouns. It is common to find sentences in

the data where students applied what they learned about the regular to the irregular forms.

Findings From the Think-Aloud

The think-aloud technique was particularly designed to explore issues related to

students’ reading strategies. Some of the students admitted not feeling comfortable with

verbalizing in Arabic. They explained it was not because of the thinking aloud procedure

itself. Rather, the main cause was that they were not comfortable with their Arabic pronunciation. Therefore, it should be noted that in conducting the think-aloud experiments I noticed that students' think-aloud outputs and their retellings were expressed mostly in English. To avoid confusion, italicized words or texts represent think aloud utterances spoken in Arabic. Some specific examples from individual students' think aloud utterances will be illustrated as supporting evidence.

The overall data from the think aloud protocols showed that students demonstrated different learning strategies and styles. In what follows, I will present the think aloud results of the students' test in reading.

Students reading the think aloud text

The think-aloud test passage was written in academic style. It contained 228 words. The average of the students' reading the test and answering the comprehension questions was 60 minutes. Sara and Dana spent the shortest time in reading, 40 minutes, while Kate spent the longest time, 60 minutes reading the text and answering the questions. It was interesting to note that translation of Arabic words to English was the most prevalent strategy used by all students. Rereading and reflecting, guessing meanings from the context, self correcting were among the reading strategies students used too. In what follows, I will describe the common approaches the students used in processing the text.

Text processing. Most of the students' reading aloud represented a word-by-word pattern in that they paid close attention to each word in the text. They paused mostly to explain each word in English without skipping trivial parts of each sentence, except for Dana and Sara who went right to the text.

Raj, John, Adam, and Kate paid close attention and carefully read every word. They jumped back and forth between paragraphs to clarify each word and understand the meaning of each word. They would stop every time they hit unknown words. However Kate seemed to struggle the most in reading. She did not seem to possess any reading strategy. While reading she did not understand many words nor could she pronounce some words. Raj, on the other hand, relied too much on clues to explain the words in the texts. In processing the text, he used comprehension strategies. Take the two examples below as supporting evidence:

Text:

اسمه أحمد و هو شاب ذكي و أخلاقه ممتازة.

Transliteration: 'ismuh-u 'aHmad wa huwa shaabb-un dhakiyy-un wa 'akhlaaqh-u
 name-his Ahmed and he young-nom smart-nom and morals his
 mumtaazat-un
 excellent-nom
 "His name is Ahmed. He is a young man with excellent morals."

Raj:

اسمه أحمد و هو شاب ذكي.

What is shaab? Got it! The teacher uses shabaab which means young people. shaab must be the singular form and means a young man.

Text:

تخرج أحمد من كلية السياحة و الفنادق منذ سنتين. ثم حصل على عمل في فندق السلام.

Transliteration: takharraja 'aHmad min kuliyyat-i siyaaHati wa l-fanaadiq. thumma
 Graduated-he Ahmed from college-acc tourism-acc and def- hotels then
 HaSala 'alaa 'amal-in fii funduqi ssalaami
 received he on work-acc in hotel peace- acc.
 "Ahmed graduated from the college of tourism and hotels two years ago.
 Then he got a job in Peace hotel."

Raj: *What does السلام mean? Oh! Assalamu alaykum means peace upon you. So, السلام means peace.*

The above snippets of the think aloud protocols illustrate that Raj presented utterances that were already stored in his mind. From his reading aloud, Adam also showed that he did not have trouble with the words that he had seen before. His reading was also tied to decoding every word. He did not show any sign of strategic reader because his guessing strategy of words did not prove that he could capture the whole meaning of the words in the text. The following think aloud reflections demonstrated by Adam confirm this:

Text:

اسمه أحمد و هو شاب ذكي و أخلاقه ممتازة.

Adam:

Ismuhu Ahmed, it means his name is Ahmed. Wa huwa shaab, I see shaab means young man as yaa shabaab that the teacher uses in class. dhakiyy is derived from the verb dhakara.

Text:

هو يسكن في الدار البيضاء بالمغرب.

Transliteration: huwa yaskunu fii ddari lbayDaa' bilmaghrib
He lived-he in def. house def. white in Morocco
"He lived in Morocco in Casablanca in Morocco."

Adam: *"huwa yaskunu. huwa is a pronoun and huwa yaskunu means he lives . I understand that fii ddar albaydaa' , baydaa means white and addaar means ...and addar should be feminine because of the adjective al-baydaa'. What is ddaar then? I do not know. almaghreb means the west. So the whole sentence means he lives in the west"*.

It would be reasonable to conclude that Adam did not demonstrate the effective use of strategies he claimed to use in the interview session in helping him to figure out unknown words. He apparently did not recognize that his guessing of the meaning of the

words did not represent a meaningful text is the most telling about his lack of strategic knowledge. His word by word pattern reading and guessing demonstrated a lack of using effective reading strategies.

Adam also tried to chunk words together in short sequences. His reading aloud represented a word-by-word pattern. He paid close attention to every word in the text. He paused very often at short phrases to process the content of the text. However, he was confident when he read words aloud. He seemed to possess adequate vocabulary. He made one self correction when he realized he made a mistake in reading. It was noted that Adam did not synthesize meaning across sentence boundaries to attain passage comprehension.

In contrast, Sara and Dana read the passage differently from the other students. They read the text with much ease and confidence. Dana paused mostly at short phrase to sentence levels to process the case ending of each word. She was not confident about the case endings of Arabic nouns. When she read, she did not pay attention to the meaning of words. She seemed to possess a robust stock of vocabulary in Arabic. Therefore, she did not have trouble in comprehending the text. She also remembered all the details of the text in the retelling session. However, she had trouble with Arabic grammar. She said:

When I see a word and see how it is written I get confused. It is not how I would say it in my mind. The word *shaabban* in the text is not known to me. If I were asked to write it, I would write and read it as *shaab* with *shadda* at the end. The way I pronounce things are different from how they are written. It is always different in my head when I read it.

Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that Dana demonstrated a bottom-up reading strategy in order not to understand the meaning of the words, but to know the case and

grammatical function of each word in the text. The following snippets demonstrated how Dana was obsessed with grammar:

Text:

اسمه أحمد و هو شاب ذكي وأخلاقه ممتازة.

Dana:

اسمه ... أحمد ... و هو ... شابٌ ... شاباً ... ذكي وأخلاقه ممتازة.

Think aloud: “ Oh! Is *shaabbun* or *shaabban*, I do not know. May be it is *shaabun*, but why double *fatHa* then? *Mumtazatan* or *mumtaatun*? It looks like *mumtaazatan*.

Sara read the text with long chunks of words. She did not stop every time she hit unknown words. It was noted that the strategies she used such as rereading and reflecting strategies seemed to be more effective. She attempted to find an Arabic synonym for each word instead of translating them into English. It seemed that when she read the text she was able to use comprehension strategies. She also remembered all the details of the text in the retelling session. She did not exhibit any sign of frustration while reading.

Diglossia

One of the most daunting pedagogical issues that has characterized the teaching of Arabic is the effect of the “problem” of diglossia. The differences between the everyday colloquial language and the standard written language are vast and problematic.

The diglossic nature of Arabic also poses serious challenges to learners of Arabic. Even though it is true that the systems of Standard Arabic and the Arabic dialects are closely related and show a considerable amount of overlap in vocabulary, they are nonetheless two different systems. Many students are sometimes surprised to discover

that they must master two or more languages, which would take them longer to learn than is the case for many other languages. Consequently, the students get frustrated and disappointed once they faced the realities of the diglossic situation in Arab countries. Data on the problems of diglossia discussed in chapter 2 is reflected by my findings. It is worth quoting the challenges that students of Arabic as a foreign language face when they travel to Arab countries. Adam's following email extract proved the point:

[...] When I first arrived and tried to speak Modern Standard Arabic with people, many people did not understand or only understood after a few repetitions. The Cairene dialect is significantly different from Modern Standard Arabic and only more educated know Modern Standard Arabic well. Although Cairene Arabic has a lot of differences from Modern Standard Arabic, it has a lot in common, obviously. Half the battle is just remembering to pronounce “qaf” like a “hamza”, “thaa” like a “siin”, “jim like a “g”, etc. The conjugation patterns are different from Modern Standard Arabic, but the differences follow an obvious pattern, so it is not too hard. It takes practice.

Kate also had the opportunity to visit Egypt as part of study abroad program. She experienced difficulties in communicating with local people using Standard Arabic. Kate reported that the Standard Arabic she learned was helpful to her in writing, reading, and listening only. She described her first experience when she had a chance to use Arabic in an authentic situation:

Since I had never taken Egyptian Arabic it was hard communicating with people in Egypt. It was difficult speaking with taxi drivers and waiters especially. Many times I would try and speak Standard Arabic and the taxi drivers would not understand. At restaurants I picked up on a few Egyptian Arabic words. Most waiters spoke a little English. So using the little Egyptian Arabic I knew and some English I was able to order. At the university where I studied I used Standard Arabic and most everyone understood. However, when speaking with college students from other universities in Cairo I had a hard time speaking with them in Standard Arabic. Although they knew it they were unable to talk with me using Standard Arabic. The most challenging thing I faced in Egypt was improving my Standard Arabic skills and trying to speak with local Egyptians. I did not take an Egyptian Arabic course because I was not sure if I should continue to focus on Standard Arabic until I become fluent. Overall, I think learning to speak Arabic is the hardest part because even though I lived in Egypt for 4 months there weren't

many opportunities outside of the classroom to speak Modern Standard Arabic. As for learning Egyptian Arabic I was not sure if it was worth taking instead of taking a Standard Arabic course because any time I go to another country Egyptian Arabic will not be used. The Standard Arabic I learned here was helpful when reading, writing, and listening to the news. It was definitely important but it would have been nice to have a crash course in Egyptian Arabic before I went.

The overall data from Adam and Kate's description showed that the diglossic nature of Arabic poses a serious challenge to learners of Arabic and supports the claims raised in chapter 2 about diglossia.

Part 3: Problems Inherent in Teaching Arabic (Pedagogy)

Teacher interview

The teacher interviewed is a native speaker of Arabic. He has taught Arabic as a teaching assistant for six years. He has been involved and attended two training workshops about teaching. He indicated that he was using the communicative approach in his teaching because he thought it was effective and the best method to fit the nature of the Arabic language. The teacher stated that he did not like the textbook assigned to his class. He agreed that the book is good in grammar discussion and the variety of themes covered in the book. However, he assumed that the book did not represent the authentic Arabic culture. Rather, it represents the Arabic culture from a western perspective. He also had a concern about the organization of the vocabulary in the book. He suggested that the vocabulary should be provided in a list of themes because the American students are oriented to learn themes.

The teacher reported that U.S. students are facing tremendous challenges in learning Arabic. The major difficulties elementary non-linguistics students faced in learning Arabic is the sound discrimination such as the difference between *h* and *ħ*; and *q*

and *k* sounds. He argued that many students at the intermediate level paid much attention to the pronunciation to the extent that they were haunted with the fear of making mistakes. To overcome these difficulties, the teacher suggested that elementary students should be intensely exposed to speaking drill and writing exercises to help them in sound discrimination. He also suggested that teachers should build a good relationship with the students and create a friendly atmosphere in class. The teacher recommended resorting to other teaching materials to enhance the students' learning.

The teacher was also asked about the techniques he used to test the four learning skills to his students and he explained that he tested their writing in quizzes, exams, and homework. When asked about speaking, he pointed out he assessed the speaking skills through their participation in class. He asserted that he did not give the oral exam at the end of the semester. Instead, he used presentations. He said:

I had the experience of giving oral exams and I think they [students] were so frightened, so haunted by the oral exam. They perform very poorly. They are not themselves. So I switched to presentations because in presentations, it does actually two things: first thing is they investigate the concepts of Arabic culture. It is also important to present in front of classmates [...]. Also this does three things, not only in terms of presentation, but also research and writing the presentation. They have to assemble the presentation itself.

The teacher used cartoons to teach listening skills. The teacher defended the use of the cartoons to improve his students' listening skills. When asked about the teaching strategies that he used in class to teach the four learning skills, the teacher pointed out that he gave the students the text to read encouraging them not to worry about the unknown vocabulary involved in the text, then broke the text into paragraphs and asked the students comprehension questions about each paragraph. The teacher explained that by making the students answer the text questions, he also involved the speaking skill at

the same time. The teacher also claimed that he involved the writing skill by asking students to write and share what they wrote with their friends. Once the students were done with this activity, the teacher told them to go over the vocabulary they did not understand.

When asked about how he taught listening, the teacher pointed out that he resorted to the cartoons he used in class to explain the techniques he used. First he exposed students to the movie, then ask them questions about the movie. Later he gave them the vocabulary and let them watch the movie for the second time. When it comes to speaking strategies, the teacher argued that he encouraged work group in the class. Students formed groups and asked questions to each other. The teacher strongly discouraged the use of English in class. For writing, the teacher gave his students assignments to write. Even when he taught grammar, he helped students to practice their writing skills.

The teacher was asked about the challenges his students faced and he admitted that they were many, the greatest of which is the lack of teaching materials and limited sources. He also complained about the class size which is detrimental to language learning. Therefore he wished the class size would be reduced to an optimal number such as having not more than fifteen students in every class. When asked about the Arabic diglossia and how it inhibited students in learning Arabic, the teacher asserted that he did not see it as a problem. Rather, he thought it was very important for the students to know Standard Arabic and any Arabic dialect varieties. The teacher said at this point:

I think it is very essential that it [diglossia] is not a problem. I think it is very essential that the students have first to learn the standard variety first and then once they have acquired the standard variety they should be introduced to certain expressions in Arabic dialect. I do not encourage them to learn the dialect once

they are in the beginning stage or even in the intermediate. I prefer that once they reach the advanced level.

When the teacher was asked about which variety he would prefer to teach his students, he chose his own dialect claiming that it is closest to Standard Arabic. He wondered why he would choose another dialect that he did not understand nor speak.

To improve the Arabic program, the teacher suggested that Arabic culture needed to be taught, class sizes had to be reduced, Arabic had to be offered as a minor in the Arabic program, and technology in teaching Arabic had to be introduced.

Training and hiring

The preparation of good teachers for teaching Arabic as a foreign language to non-Arabic speakers is a problem faced in this field. Most teachers in the Arabic program where this research was conducted are not necessarily language specialists. They were hired to teach Arabic just because they are native speakers of Arabic. A typical example is the hiring of teaching assistants from other departments to teach Arabic though they have never taught Arabic before. Some teachers are theoretically and practically unprepared to teach Arabic. The teacher interviewed in this study was a teaching assistant who was already overburdened by diverse responsibilities other than teaching. Teaching Assistants in the Arabic Program did not have much time and opportunity to attend workshops and orientations. They did not even have time to collaborate, coordinate and work together.

Learning environment

The teaching methods followed in most Arabic classes remained traditional in that the teacher lectured while the students learned passively. The teacher's principal objective seemed to prepare the students to pass examinations. This traditional method of

teaching was observed throughout several Arabic programs. Also traditional is the system of assessment and testing. The testing system heavily relied on examinations which only assessed the students' ability to master the content of the *Al-kitaab* book and other supplementary materials, which would not produce speakers of Arabic. Students turned to excessive rote learning replacing thinking and understanding with memorizing in order to pass the exam.

It was also noted that the teacher did not have an adequate inventory or syllabus structure that displayed the proposed coverage of the materials during the week. Therefore, it was not easy for the students to know what was expected of them. A common weakness noticed among Arabic teachers is the emphasis of memorizing of Arabic words as the main goal of instruction. The dialogues and stories that the observed teacher resorted to improve his students speaking skill seemed hardly adapted to the level of the students and their interests. Another problem that prevails in the Arabic program as a whole is the lack of environment where students can practice their Arabic. Students do not have opportunities to speak in Arabic outside the classroom. They also faced the problem of understanding the Arabic dialects that Arabs use in their daily life.

Interaction

The quality of teacher-student interaction reported in this study is very significant to assess the extent to which the teaching approach adopted affected the students' academic growth. In the Arabic language classroom observed, the teacher faced special challenges in terms of interaction. I observed that that there were less teacher-student and student-student interactions. It was also observed that teacher talk dominated the class with less student participation. The teacher had the authority in the classroom and the

students did as the teacher indicated. In that framework, students did not have voice and played a passive role in class. Though the teacher supported group work in the interview session, I observed that the classroom structure posed a salient problem for conducting group work activities. Seating arrangements are critical to communication, group activities and peer correction, which would help students to become aware of their strong points in learning as well as the points of weaknesses they share with others. The classroom was traditionally organized in the sense that all seats faced the teacher. The built in seats obstructed the teachers' physical movement. Therefore, opportunities for student-to-student communication and indeed for teacher-to-student communication were reduced. Some students also expressed their concern about the size of the class. The teacher also commented that the class size limited the opportunity for all students to participate. I agree with the teacher that a big class is what prevails in many Arabic programs. This is a not suitable for a language class as it limited the opportunity for students to practice the Arabic language.

Instructional materials and pedagogical practices

In my observation, I closely watched the teacher's instruction and targeted the teaching materials used in class. I also paid attention to classroom activities. To be more specific, I tried to see whether the teacher promoted the learning opportunity for students and whether the materials used in class met the students' needs.

Data from class observations show that the teacher encouraged his students to speak Arabic and tried to use Standard Arabic as a medium of instruction. When students did not understand, he translated the main idea in English. He also gave feedback when students made erroneous pronunciations. It was quite obvious that many students showed

a positive response to the teacher's attempt in using Arabic as a medium of instruction. But they were not confident in responding in Arabic because of their limited vocabulary in Arabic. Others expressed major concern about the texts used in class. The content and quantity of supplementary materials that the observed teacher used in class did not revolve around a certain topic. In addition, I observed that the pre- and post reading activities that are assumed to help the learner in reading a text and provide them with confidence were completely absent.

The vocabulary building in the observed class consisted of learning a certain number of words for a certain number of days. Students interviewed complained how difficult it was to retain and use the vocabulary. They pointed out that the vocabulary presented to them in isolation and not in meaningful contexts so that they could use them. The vocabulary lesson was conducted in the manner that required students to memorize the meaning. It is interesting to get some insights from the students of how they perceive the vocabulary presented to them in the book.

Students complained about the vocabulary in the *Al-kitaab* book that the teacher used in class. When asked about how relevant and helpful to her, Kate complained that learning the vocabulary in the textbook was one of the biggest problems she faced in learning Arabic. She said:

Probably one of the biggest issues I have had is reading new vocabulary from the text book. I am still not quite sure of the sounds that come in between consonant sounds and so I often learn words wrong. After that, I have to learn the words with their proper sounds. Then I struggle to remember which version of the word is the real one. Also, because I learn the words wrong when I hear other people use them, it takes me a long time to recognize them. And when I read the words wrong, I tend to continue reading them the wrong way.

John shared the same opinion. He reported that

In regards to my first point about our text book *Al-kitaab* during my academic career I have spent many years studying languages, but never have I come upon a language book such as *Al-kitaab* that poorly presents the material. First of all, it is disorganized in regards to vocabulary. Many times there will be new vocabulary presented that will not correlate with the theme of the rest of the vocabulary words. For instance, in chapter three of *Al-kitaab*'s vocabulary section, the theme is the family. So, why include words such as Political Science and college in this section? Why not have one section just devoted to subjects instead of interjecting subjects sporadically throughout the vocabulary sections. This inconsistency in the vocabulary lists makes it even hard to memorize the words.

Sara also said:

Vocabulary is another area which needs extra study, and it is an ongoing challenge in my experience with the language. Although I think that the textbook is excellent resource, I feel like the vocabulary lessons are not always as practical as they could be. The chapters provide a nice basic vocabulary, but I found myself occasionally frustrated by writing sentences that I would really need to produce in conversation. I was also surprised that I had to wait until chapter 9 of the text to find lesson on telling time.

Adam complained about how difficult it was to retain the vocabulary presented in class. He said:

I would say that my main problem is my relatively limited vocabulary, and the fact that it is sometimes difficult to retain new vocabulary words as they are presented in class. Also contributing to this is the relatively small number English to Arabic cognates that we have encountered thus far, whereas when I was learning German I had the luxury of the large shared vocabulary between the two languages. Additionally I find that with the quick pace of college level language classes it is very hard to keep up with the memorization of new words at the same pace as the class is progressing.

Raj also pointed out that he did not like how the vocabulary was presented in the book.

He explained:

I believe that there are other things on the class that are not beneficial to me. First of all, I am not the biggest fan of the textbook. The vocabulary that we learn at the beginning of each chapter is random and sometimes contextually unnecessary. For example we learned how to say the United Nations. Why do we need this before other more important phrases such as "I am hungry" or "My name is"? I think this is rather silly.

Though Dana did not face many difficulties in learning Arabic, she complained that the organization of the words in the *Al-kitaab* book did not help her to memorize them. She said:

I feel that it is hard to retain [vocabulary] and I already speak a Semitic language, so the vocabulary is completely random and hard to pick up because of it. If they were maybe a little more thematically organized, it would be easier to remember what our words deal with. Half the time I forget a word is even in our vocabulary for the chapter because they are so random. There are activities in the book that are meant for using vocabulary, but I feel that they do not help because the sentences are usually very vague and do not provide accurate context.

The students' comments covered most of the aspects involved in the textbook vocabulary. Some of them even expressed the extreme view that although they were highly motivated to learn Arabic, the presentation of the vocabulary in the *Al-kitaab* book and the method of teaching them in class had dulled their enthusiasm, causing disappointment and a feeling of frustration.

Data from classroom observations also showed that the materials used for listening involve difficult materials that were beyond the level of the students involved. The language laboratory can be of great assistance to the students if it is consistently utilized. This was not the case at all not only in the observed class, but in all Arabic classes. The lab is offered once per week. The teacher tended to emphasize the importance of using cartoons and movies during the lab session. The movies used during the lab were historical and most of them classic. Some of them seemed out of date and uninteresting to the students whose main interest is the Arabs and their culture at the present time. The length of interval between the teacher's questions about the movies content and students' responses was too short making it so difficult for them to provide correct answers. It is important to note, however, that the observed teacher unfolded his

insightful and interesting comments in the interview session regarding the positive effects of the use of such cartoons and movies on students' learning process in the lab.

To sum up, the students who entered Arabic classrooms brought their history of foreign language learning practices with the intention to apply what they learned before to Arabic learning. However, they encountered dilemmas and were surprised to find a difficult language, a different pedagogical approach and challenging curriculum that did not meet their needs and expectations. In chapter 5 I will address responses to these dilemmas that will result in a new vision of how the Arabic language pedagogy will work.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

The data showed that the participants faced tremendous problems in learning Arabic when they first started learning it at the university where this research was conducted. The present chapter is devoted to answering problems that were identified at the end of chapter 4 and addresses responses to the challenges that students are facing in learning Arabic. In my discussion, I draw interpretations emerging from the findings to link to the literature reviewed in chapter 2.

Student Learning History and Recommendations

The first question sought to discover the foreign languages students learned in the past and how they contributed or hindered the learning of Arabic. Students' responses to this question have shown that the study of commonly taught languages such as French, German, and Spanish have maintained a viable position in foreign language programs. History and availability of certified instructors have rendered these languages the most commonly taught languages. The participating students in this study had been exposed to at least one commonly taught language in high school. Adam learned Spanish and German. John, Raj, and Kate studied French. Sara and Dana took Spanish. However, this success in foreign languages did not extend to less commonly taught languages such as Arabic. Nothing prepared the students for a Semitic, structurally different language. So when they came to class, they encountered dilemmas and were surprised with the degree of difficulty they experienced with the Arabic language in comparison to their prior foreign language learning. This is evident from the current research. The participants did

not have knowledge in using appropriate strategies in dealing with the difficulties they faced while learning Arabic. They no doubt demonstrated limited understanding and performance in the comprehension text.

As stated in chapter 2, the history of Arabic is bound with the study of the Bible and research conducted on Arabic was purely religious in nature. Therefore, not many studies were conducted in teaching Arabic as a foreign language. Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, enrollment in Arabic courses appears to reflect the desire of many U.S. students to understand the Arabic language and culture. More specifically, the students have more than one motive for learning Arabic. It was noted that the most important motives were to have better job opportunities, to fulfill academic requirements, to know the Arabic culture and to communicate with Arabs.

Despite the laudable motivation and surge in enrollment, many students embark on studying Arabic with little or no knowledge of the language. When in Arabic classes, the students were surprised to find that they had to master a new structure which was completely different from the system of English and the languages they were exposed to in high school. Therefore, anxiety tends to be high among students of Arabic in the first year. The research data provide strong supporting evidence and confirmation about the relationship between anxiety and the belief that Arabic is the most difficult language, especially when the students were asked about their perception of Arabic as a foreign language. What interestingly emerged from this question and is worth mentioning is that there is a correlation between anxiety and learning achievement in the sense that a high level of anxiety could have negative and adverse affects on students' performance (Bailey, 1983). In other words, anxiety plays an important role in foreign language

students' classroom performance. Anxiety develops if the student's achievements and experiences with the foreign language are not positive (English, 1997). Anxious students may underestimate their own ability, which in turn diminishes their performance and achievement in class (MacIntyre, Novels & Clement, 1997). The participants reported the anxiety and fear they experienced in the first days of learning Arabic. Kate and John even pointed out that they were thinking of dropping the class. It is important to note that students' belief that Arabic is difficult combined with their anxiety make Arabic an exotic language for U.S. students.

It should be noted that research conducted in more commonly taught languages should be extended to less commonly taught languages as well. Since many U.S. students have the privilege to learn more commonly taught languages in high schools, this should also extend to Arabic. High schools should be double funded and encouraged to include Arabic in their curricula. It would be easier for students to learn Arabic in high school. A high school graduate with a background of Arabic structure would have more potential to excel in learning Arabic at the university than a student who starts learning Arabic at the university. The number of high schools offering Arabic should be increased if we intend to prepare skilled students in Arabic who will be qualified to teach Arabic in the future. I also recommend that instructors of Arabic develop an annual convention with teachers of more commonly taught languages to exchange thoughts and ideas about the difficulties that the students are facing. The success in foreign language teaching and learning should extend to Arabic through the participation in orientations and workshops. Arabic will never thrive if teachers of Arabic do not collaborate with other teachers of the commonly taught languages, who have more experience in teaching and have maintained a viable

position in foreign language programs. The annual foreign languages orientation that the Department of Classical and Modern Languages, Cultures and Literatures at Wayne State University organizes is a good start. It is a workshop which involves all full time faculty and part-timers of all languages, including those of Arabic. Within this scenario, Arabic may still be called a “critical” language in numerical terms, but through participation in workshops such as these, it has joined company with the more commonly taught languages in this common task. I myself have certainly benefited from contacts with teachers of other languages. It is my hope that all Arabic programs will experience and benefit from the same experience. There is no doubt that from this dynamic relationship, interaction and cooperation, there will be benefits to the whole language learning field.

Challenges and Recommendations

The findings showed that Arabic is complex and posed a serious challenge to the participants. There are many differences between Arabic and English which would predict that second language learners of Arabic would experience difficulty in learning Arabic. Grammatically, it pales in comparison with some of the world’s languages (Belnap, 2006). Students needed to master a new system, which differed from English and the languages they learned in high school. The participants faced difficulties in Arabic morphology. They had problems with case, definiteness, word order, and the number system, among others. Given the peculiarities of the languages students learned in high school and English, the students seemed to benefit from their L1 and L2 closeness and similarities. They were able to draw on English at many levels. However, they did not profit much from their educational background when learning Arabic because Arabic

is a non-cognate language (Hamdaoui, 2006). The findings of the present study are similar to other studies regarding the difficulty caused by constructions which are different in Arabic and English.

There is also abundant evidence of English influence in learning Arabic. The specific errors found reinforce the evidence of native language interference. The analysis of the think-aloud also revealed that the students demonstrated low level reading strategies. Students' proficiency of Arabic was poor. They had problems in expressing themselves and some of them found the reading text very difficult although it was compatible with their levels in terms of difficulty. Most students do not have the ability to read the comprehension text well and they spent a lot of time in finding the appropriate vocabulary to use. It is also quite likely that the writing system of Arabic played a major role in the estimation of the amount of time needed to acquire it. The Arabic alphabet presents major challenges for U.S. students in the first stages of Arabic learning. Letters take different forms according to their positions in words. Also, short vowels are not part of the word as they are in English and many words in Arabic have different meanings according to the difference in their vowels though they have the same consonants. Since texts are not always vocalized, this may lead to students' confusion. Another difficulty of the Arabic language is that words take different grammatical endings according to their grammatical functions. For example, the grammatical ending of an indefinite word like "kaatib," which means "writer," might be "kaatib-un," "kaatib-an," or "kaatib-in," depending on the context where it occurs.

The participants showed some mistakes in writing that are normally made by first year learners of Arabic. It was observed that the same constructions which cause

difficultly for beginning students cause difficulty for intermediate students as well. It is very hard to believe that Arabic teachers should not explain any Arabic construction at all to their first-year students, and then suddenly start by providing extensive explanations in the second year. The general claim is that basic Arabic construction and the writing system should be the goal of classroom instruction from the beginning.

The participants expressed more concerns about their vocabulary limitations. Even Dana, who is a student of Arabic descent, expressed concern about the vocabulary limitation. Finding the equivalent word in Arabic was her biggest obstacle. Students' struggle in finding the appropriate vocabulary reflects the marginality of vocabulary teaching in the Arabic curricula. This marginal attention to vocabulary was noted in the observed class. The vocabulary was explained in a non-context. The vocabulary building in the observed class consisted of learning a certain number of words for a certain number of days. They were presented in isolation and not in meaningful contexts so that students can use them. The vocabulary lesson was conducted in the manner that required students to memorize the meaning. Contextualization of vocabulary is very important in helping learners retain the new words. Effective communication in language relies on the possession of adequate and contextualized vocabulary. Further recommendations about vocabulary teaching are explored and elaborated below.

Recommendations for teaching vocabulary

Despite its importance to the learning of Arabic at large, vocabulary remains less emphasized in most Arabic classes. The teaching of vocabulary building in the observed class consisted of learning a certain number of words for a certain number of days. As stated above, students interviewed complained about how difficult it was to retain and use

the vocabulary in meaningful sentences. They pointed out that the vocabularies were presented to them in isolation and not in meaningful contexts so that they could use them. Students' voices should be beneficial for Arabic teachers to re-consider the way they teach Arabic vocabulary. The Arabic teaching profession needs to address the dire need for studies addressing various aspects of the vocabulary learning process (Al-Batal, 2006).

The Arabic teachers should present activities such as role play, games, and discussions to facilitate the use of learned vocabulary. For example, if a teacher wants the students to use certain learned vocabulary, he or she should introduce a conversation where that vocabulary is used in meaningful sentences and where all students participate in class. The teacher also should use pictures in teaching and reviewing certain vocabulary. Students should be taught words in their contextual contexts and be encouraged to use them. Using vocabulary in their contextual context is the best way to make the language more functional and learning more lasting. Through my experience in teaching Arabic, I noticed that whenever vocabulary is taught in context, the students learned it better and retained it much longer than when they studied it as isolated words. It takes time for students of Arabic to retain vocabulary easily because of the nature of the Arabic language and the absence of cognate words that exist, for instance, between English and German, which makes it very hard for the speaker of English to retain. However, though vocabulary lessons are important in the learning process, the teacher should not prioritize them over other linguistic aspects.

Recommendations for dealing with diglossia

Although the question of binary distinction between Standard Arabic and Spoken Arabic varieties has been posed ever since the teaching of Arabic began in the United States, it is far from having reached a consensus even in the Arab World. The issue of diglossia is not merely a linguistic one, but a political and national one as well. It mirrors the conflict in some Arab countries between Standard Arabic advocates who associate Standard Arabic with pan-Arab nationalism and the colloquial Arabic supporters who see the colloquial Arabic as a marker of national identity (Zouhir, 2008).

It has been demonstrated in chapter 4 that diglossia poses a great challenge to U.S. students learning Arabic. The differences between the everyday colloquial language and the standard written language are vast and problematic. Even though it is true that the systems of Standard Arabic and the Arabic dialects are closely related and show a considerable amount of overlap in vocabulary, they are nonetheless two different systems. Many students are sometimes surprised to discover that they must master two languages, which would take them longer to learn than is the case for many other languages. As reported in chapter 4, students felt frustrated and disappointed when they faced and experienced the realities of the diglossic situation in Arab countries and any endeavor to speak Standard Arabic with Arabs usually ends with unsatisfactory outcomes and expectations.

Teachers of Arabic as a foreign language are continuously faced with the question of which variety to teach. The majority of teachers in American universities are from different Arab countries and they brought with them preferences of their own regional dialect and biases towards the other Arabic dialects. It is common to hear that a

certain variety of Arabic dialect is closer to Standard Arabic than the other and every teacher should normally prefer to teach his or her dialect thinking that it is the closest variety to Standard Arabic.

Though it is true that diglossia poses a great challenge to the learners of Arabic, some linguists refused to accept any interpretation of the Arabic language situation as problematic because Arabic is not the only language with this diglossic nature (Steven, 2006). The teacher interviewed in this study did not consider it as detrimental either. He saw diglossia as a positive feature and did not appear to motivate any interpretation of it as an “abnormal” or problematic situation. When he was asked about how he dealt with it in class, he pointed out that “it is very essential that the students have first to learn the Standard variety first because it is the language that has the capital in the education market. Then once they have acquired the Standard variety, they can be introduced to a variety of Arabic dialect that the teacher masters well.” Along this line, I reject the assumption that the Arabic language situation is unique, unparalleled, and different from other language communities. Arabic diglossia should not be considered a problem. It is useful and realistic for learners to master speaking colloquial Arabic. Language reality in the Arab World shows that oral communication using a colloquial variety is important because it is an integral part of the linguistic repertoire of speakers of Arabic and used naturally in a large set of social situations. Many more students than before are taking Arabic classes to communicate with Arabs while abroad. If the goal of the Arabic programs is to prepare students for real proficiency, then the country the students plan to visit dictates the Arabic dialect to be taught in the classroom. If we accept such a conclusion, the question of whether to start teaching Standard Arabic first and the

colloquial or vice versa is not that important. Both approaches are effective if students' interests are taken into consideration.

Textbook recommendations

Despite the surge in the number of students learning Arabic, textbooks designed to teach Arabic are deficient in several areas. The majority of universities use different books. There is a competition among Arabic textbooks, which leads to the absence of authors who strive to produce outstanding Arabic books. Some of these books do not have clear plans for equipping students with necessary linguistic tools to build up confidence to speak Arabic fluently. Even the books which claim to have such plans are often judged to be not well organized in material presentation. It is likely that the difficulties that students face in learning Arabic may result more from poor textbooks without efficient methods than from actual difficulties inherent in the Arabic language itself. It is normal to hear or read complaints about the assigned textbooks. The participants, for example, complained and expressed sincere remarks that they did not like the way the vocabulary was selected and presented in the assigned book (i.e., *Al-kitaab*). Selection of vocabulary is necessary and important for teaching any language.

Some Arabic teachers might not be able to determine which book to use because the textbook they choose may have been predetermined for them. In fact, it is the teachers themselves who should shape the textbook and mold it to fit their teaching methods and style. They should select the vocabulary and structures that their students need when they try to write a textbook. Learning is most likely to take place when students perceive that the content and activities are relevant to their interests and goals. In view of this, students need to be consulted about the books that equip them with necessary vocabulary and that

they can use in communication. From the teacher's voice and the learning outcomes, it is clear that there is a dire need for more research and better textbooks.

Recommendations for students' participation

The success of class participation depends to a great extent on the choice of topics and the involvement of all students in class participation. To help students accomplish this task, teachers as facilitators should create a classroom atmosphere that is conducive to the participation of all students in class. Cooperating with peers requires the students to work together on activities toward a common goal using games and simulations that encourage interactions among students. They should be encouraged to learn in groups and to learn from each others' mistakes. Furthermore, the relationship between instructors and students is important in the process of learning Arabic. Teachers should be aware that teaching students in a traditional fashion without involving them in the decision making process can dramatically cause a negative impact on students' overall performance in Arabic. Also, the power relation inherent between the teacher and the students in the classroom might impact learning.

The instructor should present the process of teaching Arabic in the most pleasant classroom atmosphere. A feeling for social solidarity is required and the teaching style should reflect a non authoritative attitude. The total involvement of the students throughout the learning process is the principal factor underlying the success of any class. In that framework, learning becomes a dynamic process in which the students play an active role. The instruction should focus on the learner-centered perspective with a wide variety of activities offered in class, which would encourage the students to actively participate. It is quite likely that this will successfully be achieved in small classes.

Participation of all students, especially those who are shy or not motivated, can be even harder to expect in crowded classes. My observation regarding the impact of big Arabic classes suggested that this type of classes is not very conducive to promoting students' participation and student-students interactions. The observed teacher hoped that the Arabic classes' size will be smaller in the future, but it is hard for him to determine when his hope will come true.

The need for authenticity

Learning is generated through social interaction. With limited exposure to the authentic situations where the use of the target language takes place, learning tends to be slower and difficult. Therefore, the authenticity of the teaching materials is a subject of consideration. The outcomes of this current study support the claim that there were very rare occasions for the participants to have direct contact with Arabs. Though there are many international students from Arab countries working, visiting, and studying in the university where this research was conducted, the participants tended to speak with them in English because of the Arabic colloquial barriers. In order to respond to the non authenticity of Arabic classes, Arabic programs should take practical steps to include authentic teaching environments into their curriculum. This can be achieved through exchange with students of Arab universities and regular communication with them through meetings and teleconferencing. The Arabic language program should encourage students to apply for study abroad. This helps the students to access opportunities for Arabic literacy development outside the classroom realistically and in authentic situations. Since learning is not merely a linguistic endeavor, teachers should be encouraged to host exchange students from other Arab countries to their universities.

Ironically, as interest among Arab students for study in the United States has arisen, students flow abroad have steadily decreased since the events of September 11. This is due to the greater difficulties for Arab students to obtain visas (Coffman, 1996). Therefore, alternative strategies should be evolved in order to help Arab students to visit U.S. universities for study and research.

Learners' access to the target language can be greatly enhanced and facilitated by mentors (Samimy, 2008). In this regard, I mention one instance where the research involvement of my dissertation director at the University of Illinois and a professor from Moulay Ismail University in Morocco, resulted in an exchange between students of the Language & Literacy and Secondary English Education program at the University of Illinois and students of the English program at Moulay Ismail University in Meknes, Morocco. These exchanges were part of a research project investigating the use of computer technology to promote trans-national dialogue within postsecondary educational settings. The advantages of this students' exchange are obvious as it provided a powerful context for a dialogue that significantly helped the participants to change the stereotypes they had towards each others' religious beliefs and cultures. Other useful suggestions include sending students to Arabic immersion and summer programs in U.S. universities such as the Arabic school at Middlebury College.

Middlebury Arabic immersion program is the first Arabic program in the United States where students are totally immersed in Arabic for a 9-week intensive program (Abdalla, 2006). Teachers and students are expected to keep up with the intensive demands on an everyday basis. Summer intensive courses are equivalent to an academic year of language instruction. I had the opportunity to teach Arabic there in Summer 2005

and noted that students in the Arabic school spent all their working hours “in the Arabic language”. They spoke Arabic at all times with classmates and teachers, etc. Upon their arrival, students sign the Middlebury language pledge to speak Arabic only and are asked to abide by it for the duration of the summer. The language pledge is a very serious commitment and its violation can result in dismissal from the Arabic school. Teachers are equally committed to the same mission and are encouraged to help students speak Arabic and observe the pledge.

The need for qualified teachers

It is fair to say that advances in second language teaching occurred in more commonly taught languages before they did in less commonly taught languages such as Arabic. There was no tradition of pedagogy in Arabic and the teaching materials were not satisfactory. Also, the teaching of Arabic in large classes has posed a controversial issue in several Arab programs because there were not enough teachers. Despite the heightened interest in Arabic in U.S. universities, the need for trained teachers of Arabic outweighs the supply. The limited budget does not allow the university to fill up sufficient teaching vacancies that would make teaching of Arabic in small classes plausible. Therefore students are jammed in a class and teaching assistants or part-timers are hired to teach. Being a native or having native fluency in Arabic is sometimes the only quality sought in the Arabic language teacher. These teaching assistants and part-timers are not necessarily language specialists and they are already overburdened by diverse responsibilities other than teaching. They do not have opportunities to attend workshops and orientations where they can hone their teaching skills and the materials used for teaching Arabic are not selected in accordance to the program curriculum. They need basic pedagogical

training in teaching Arabic. Such training will introduce teachers of Arabic to principles of language teaching, preparing syllabi, and classroom management. Ideally, teachers would have the opportunity to prepare lessons under the supervision of experienced teachers. To support this point, Al-Batal and Belnap (2006) suggested micro-teaching that provide less experienced Arabic language teachers the opportunity to observe experienced teachers in action and prepare lessons under their guidance and supervision. Therefore, only teachers with special training in teaching foreign languages and with a special understanding of Arabic should be hired to teach the language. Only well-trained teachers who show interest and validity in foreign language teaching should be considered in hiring. Well-trained teachers who project their vitality in foreign language instruction seem to retain a greater number of learners than do other teachers (Kara, 1976). Many U.S. students seem to see Arabic as the most difficult language to learn. If there were controlled teaching conditions and qualified Arabic teachers, it is unlikely that this standing belief will remain.

The need for teachers who can integrate technology in the learning process is very pressing. Teachers should benefit from recent technology by going beyond the most practical use of technology in the lab only. Without systematic use of technology in class, teachers cannot enhance the traditional methods of teaching Arabic that prevailed in several Arabic programs. Thus, it is reasonable to identify the advantages of using technology and propose ways to integrate it in the teaching process of Arabic.

Advantages of Technology Use in Class

Among the positive sides of using technology in teaching is that the web and technology can free teaching and learning from the physical boundaries of classrooms and the time restraints of class schedules. Teachers can work anywhere in the world as part of a globally networked virtual classroom environment. Similar benefits come from students' taking part in collaborative projects with other classrooms around the country and the world. The use of technology in teaching Arabic is a supplement to traditional classroom environments and provides new opportunities for exploiting the advantages of the technology and facilities of the university. The electronic mail and computer conferencing increase opportunities for students and faculty to converse and exchange work much more speedily than before, and more thoughtfully and safely than when confronting each other in a classroom or faculty office. For many students, the electronic mail and computer conferencing are more intimate, protected, and convenient than the more intimidating demands of face to face communication with faculty. This might explain why the participants never stopped by the teacher's office to ask for questions or explanation of things they did not grasp in class. It is also to be noted that computers give learners the freedom to work at their own pace and level, and to receive immediate and personalized feedback. In terms of group dynamics, they enable learners to pool their knowledge in more effective ways and enhance peer correction and language repair work.

Many teaching language programs have shown their interest in supplementing, if not replacing the traditional philological programs with more focus on technology, where the focus is not only on reading but also on speaking, listening and writing skills using the technology in hand. Textbooks, Web-based materials and instructional software are

now available and used in many Arabic programs worldwide. A number of computer programs were also developed to supplement classroom instruction and the use of video materials is on the rise as well (Samy, 2006). Use of the language laboratory is probably the most common practical application of technology in many Arabic classes. However, advances in technology and its increasing availability in the university make it incumbent upon Arabic programs to go beyond the use of technology in the lab only and look critically at how technology should be integrated into teacher preparation programs and Arabic curricula. In seeking to prepare excellent and experienced teachers, the Arabic teachers are increasingly being expected to use and model the use of technology, to facilitate its use by their students, and to integrate technology into instruction. To achieve this, teachers of Arabic should upgrade and equip themselves with the contemporary technology skills necessary to perform better in teaching. Understanding how to use new information sources efficiently and appropriately (including laserdiscs, CD-roms, the internet, and the World Wide Web) will prepare students for the increasing dependence on such technologies in college.

The combination of technology, innovative teaching approaches, and instructional materials will have a significant impact on improving Arabic learning and teaching. It gives students the opportunity to communicate with their teachers through the use of an electronic system like moodle, blackboard, weblog, online chat rooms, or other forms of sophisticated technology. Through this system students can chat and exchange ideas. This will inevitably lead to new methods of teaching and learning Arabic, using computers to deliver teaching and encourage communication among students.

In terms of writing, the technology provides writing animation and instructions that guides the students in writing. It involves word, sentence and paragraph writing processes. In fact, the teacher should think of teaching writing with technology the same way they think of the writing processes: prewriting, writing, and rewriting process and students can develop vocabulary lists based on the online materials and try to develop them in written descriptions. Using software programs, Arabic teachers can create their own crosswords or word search puzzles. Students can use these programs to enrich their writings and overcome the difficulties they faced in handwriting.

Technology functions as a bridge to higher reading achievement by engaging students in learning that is relevant and meaningful. It helps students to read extensively from books, novels and newspapers or any texts both for academic and recreational purposes. The Arabic program must identify some crucial components of reading instruction that must be delivered in an explicit and organized way. Vocabulary is also very important to reading comprehension. Students cannot make sense of text without understanding what most of the words mean. Therefore, vocabulary activities should be fostered in Arabic classes as they assist students in learning words that are not likely to encounter in their daily experiences. Learning experiences that encourage students to actively work with words rather than merely memorizing definitions improves word learning. Multimedia technologies that combine words with visual images and sound encourage students to construct complex mental schema that results in greater understanding of words.

When it comes to listening, in addition to the online materials, DVDS must be included and should involve and reinforce the vocabulary and structure students have

learned and provide an opportunity to sharpen phonological skills. The use of animated cartoons using dialogues and short stories in the online materials will enhance the listening skills. Listening to Arabic radio or TV channels will definitely enhance the students' listening skill and enrich their knowledge of the diglossic nature of Arabic.

Students should also be exposed to texts which deal with history, culture, and politics of the Arab world. They should be asked to read or listen to the text and try to extract cultural and political components from the text. Students can also see a movie and then discuss its cultural and political aspects or interview a political figure from the Arab world online.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated that the Arabic learning outcomes are influenced by a large number of factors. Some of these factors fell within established pedagogical frameworks and some are due to the nature of Arabic and the learning environment. To respond to such problems, I have proposed some recommendations for teaching and learning Arabic. My attempt is to place Arabic within the fold of other foreign languages rather than to keep it outside that milieu, like some exotic plant. It is important to note that without further systematic research involving both theoretical and empirical studies, the field of Arabic teaching and learning will never develop to serve the needs of teachers and students appropriately and effectively.

Limitations of the Study

The present study has some limitations despite its valuable findings. Although I attempted to collect data from different sources to maximize credibility of my research, I would like to admit that the quality of the data is limited due to a lack of observations and interviews of all teachers of the Arabic program. It is also less likely to generalize this research to other Arabic programs. Moreover, I should admit that I faced various problems in applying the think-aloud approach to the four learning skills. Although the students were given practice and warm-up activities in the think-aloud procedure prior to using it for data collection and were instructed that the main point was not to explain, but to report what occurred in their minds, they ended up explaining. I found out that reading was the best learning skill that students excelled in applying the instruction given to them about the think-aloud approach. The small number of participants also posed a limitation for this study. I would argue that the recruitment of students from different levels of Arabic could enrich the research findings. Therefore, the findings of this research should not be treated as general and applicable to all levels of Arabic.

However, despite the limitations mentioned above, the present research findings might be important to researchers, curriculum planners and instructional designers. They could inspire suggestions that deserve the consideration of Arabic language practitioners and theorists.

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Appendix A

Consent Letter

November 9, 2006

You are invited to participate in a research project that surveys the backgrounds of students and their reasons for enrolling in the Arabic language program. This project will be conducted by Abderrahmane Zouhir and Professor Mark Dressman from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In this project, Mr. Zouhir will provide you with a one-page survey, to be filled out today in your Arabic class. The questions on this survey ask you to provide information about your major of study, your prior experiences with the Arabic language, your family background, and your reasons for studying Arabic. In addition, there is a second page on which you will be asked if you would be willing to participate further in this study (beyond the survey). We anticipate that it will take approximately 10 minutes of your time to complete the questionnaire. If you are interested, please sign the second page and keep it attached (stapled) to the survey. If not, leave the second page blank. The survey and all other information obtained during this research project will be kept secure. Copies of the survey will be kept in a locked office and will be accessible only to project personnel. Responses to all surveys will be tallied and will be destroyed after the project is completed.

We do not anticipate any risk to this study greater than normal life and we anticipate that the results will increase our understanding of effective teaching techniques to improve Arabic language instruction. The results of this study may be used to inform future program decisions about the Arabic program, and for a dissertation, a scholarly report, a journal article and a conference presentation. Your name and identity will not be included in any data to be released.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty. Your choice to participate or not will not impact your grade for this course. You are also free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. If you do not choose not participate, please check below and sign your name with the date. You then need not complete the survey.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Mr. Zouhir by telephone at 244-6815 or by e-mail at zouhir@uiuc.edu or Professor Mark Dressman at 244-6815 or mdressma@uiuc.edu.

Sincerely,

Mark Dressman

_____ I DO NOT wish to participate in this survey.

Signature

Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact Anne Robertson, Bureau of Educational Research, 217-333-3023, or arobrtsn@uiuc.edu or the Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or irb@uiuc.edu

Appendix B

Arabic Language Survey

Course -----

Section -----

I am conducting a survey to determine who takes Arabic classes at UIUC and why they take them. Please take few moments to complete the questionnaire. This information will NOT be shared with your instructor.

1. Your age: _____ Male: _____ Female: _____

2. How would you describe your national/ethnic background (e.g., Northern European, African American, African, Arabic, Chinese, etc.).

3. What is your degree program (e.g., B.A. in History, M.B.A., Ph.D. in linguistics, etc.)?

4. Before enrolling in the Arabic program, did you have any knowledge of the Arabic language or any of its dialects? Do you speak a dialect of Arabic? If so, how well?

5. Do any members of your family speak any Arabic dialect? If so, which members? Which dialect?

6. Have you studied or spoken any other languages besides Arabic and English? What are they? How would you describe your ability to speak these languages?

7. Will you take more Arabic courses? If so, when? _____ Spring 07; _____ Fall 07

8. Why are you studying Arabic? (related to career goals; required for program; religious interests; curious)

If you would like to participate further in this study, please provide your name and e-mail address. If you do not want to participate, please leave your name and address blank.

Name: (Please print)

E-mail Address:

Appendix C

Sample Students' Interview Questions

- 1) Why did you choose to learn Arabic?
- 2) What do you think about learning Arabic? How important is it to you?
- 3) Do your parents know you are taking Arabic? Do they support you to learn it?
- 4) How long have you been studying Arabic?
- 5) Tell me about your learning history of languages in the past. Which languages did you take?
- 6) How fluent are you in these languages?
- 7) What are your memories of success/failures in learning these languages?
- 8) Do you remember the first day you studied Arabic? Tell me about that experience.
- 9) What are your strengths and weaknesses in learning Arabic?
- 10) How many hours do you spend studying Arabic in the university and at home?
- 11) Which learning skill (i.e. reading, writing, speaking or listening) do you find more difficult?
- 12) How do you cope with your learning difficulties?
- 13) Have you even talked with your teacher or classmates about the difficulties you are facing in learning Arabic?
- 14) How often do you see your teacher in office hours?
- 15) Tell me about the teaching materials you are using in class.
- 16) Do you have a lot of assignments?
- 17) Tell me how you cope with these assignments. Do you work alone or with friends? Do you get support from parents or friends?

- 18) How do you read? What strategies do you use? (Do you read everything or just skim and summarize?)
- 19) Do you think you are a good reader of Arabic? What characterizes a good reader?
- 20) How do you write? What strategies do you use in writing? (Do you write main ideas first and develop them or you directly write?)
- 21) Do you think you are a good writer of Arabic? What characterizes a good writer?
- 22) How do you listen? What strategies do you use in listening? (Do you take notes while listening?)
- 23) Do you think you are a good listener of Arabic? What characterizes a good listener?
- 24) Do you have the opportunity to use Arabic a lot? Tell me about the opportunity when and where you use Arabic?
- 25) Do you think you are a good speaker of Arabic? What characterizes a good speaker?
- 26) Do you learn a lot in class? What do you learn?
- 27) Tell me about the common classroom activities? Do you participate a lot in class?

Appendix D

Sample Teacher's Interview Questions

1. When and where did you first start teaching Arabic?
2. How long have you been teaching Arabic?
3. Can you tell me about the goals of teaching Arabic?
4. Have you ever attended any teaching orientation and participated in video critiques of teaching Arabic?
5. What is your preferred method of teaching Arabic? Do you think it is effective? Please state your reasons.
6. From your experience what teaching methods do most teachers use? Why do they use that method?
7. How many students do you have?
8. What have you noticed about your students' attitude and motivation in class?
9. What do you think about *Alkitaab* that is assigned for this class? Why did you recommend it?
10. In your experience, what are the biggest challenges that students of the Arabic program face in using this book?
11. How would you help your students face these challenges?
12. How do you follow your students' progress?
13. How many students stop by your office?
14. How many times per week do you assign homework to your students?
15. How many quizzes do you assign per semester?
16. Do you use other materials besides the book *Alkitaab*? If so, what are they?

17. Do you test students in the four learning skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening, and speaking)? Tell me how you rate the overall learning skills.
18. Other than homework, what do you encourage your students to read or do?
19. What have you noticed about your students' homework and assignments with respect to their Arabic literacy skills?
20. What are some of the constraints you face in teaching Arabic?
21. How do you deal with the Arabic diglossia in class?
22. If you are given the choice to use a dialect in class, which Arabic dialect will you choose? Why?
23. Do you use technology in teaching and what do you think about the use of technology in learning and teaching Arabic?
24. Which teaching activities do you use in reading, listening, speaking, and writing?
25. What do you view as strengths/weaknesses of American students to study Arabic?
26. In your opinion, are you pleased with the present situation of the Arabic learning-teaching process? Please state your reasons.
27. Based on your experience and interaction with the students, what do you think can be done to improve Arabic learning for American students?

Appendix E

امتحان The Test

مهارة القراءة: Reading

اسمه أحمد و هو شاب ذكي و أخلاقه ممتازة. يسكن أحمد في منطقة كبيرة في مدينة الدار البيضاء بالمغرب. تخرج أحمد من كلية السياحة و الفنادق منذ سنتين ثم حصل على عمل في فندق "السلام" في نفس المدينة. والد أحمد، و اسمه ابراهيم، أستاذ اللغة العربية في الخمسين من عمره. والدة أحمد، و اسمها مريم، عمرها أربعون عاما. هي ربة بيت الآن، لكنها كانت معلمة في مدرسة ثانوية بالدار البيضاء. لأحمد ثلاث أخوات، واحدة في السابعة و العشرين و هي متزوجة منذ سنتين و اسمها فاطمة، و الأخرى نادية و عمرها إثنا عشر عاما و هي تلميذة ممتازة في الصف الخامس الابتدائي، و هناك أيضا سلمى في العاشرة من عمرها و هي في المدرسة أيضا.

أحمد لا يعيش مع أسرته. هو يسكن في بيت صغير لكنه جميل. يتكون بيته من غرفة النوم و غرفة المعيشة و حمام صغير.

أحمد يعمل ستة أيام في الأسبوع من الساعة السادسة صباحا إلى الساعة الرابعة بعد الظهر. لذلك يومه يبدأ في الساعة الرابعة عندما يصحو من النوم، ثم ينزل من البيت في الخامسة صباحا. أحمد لا يملك سيارة. هو يركب الأتوبيس كل يوم من موقف (bus stop) قرب بيته و تستغرق (lasts) رحلته نصف ساعة بسبب الازدحام. يعود أحمد إلى البيت في الساعة الخامسة بعد الظهر بعد يوم طويل و متعب، ثم يشاهد التلفزيون بعد أن يأكل العشاء و قبل أن ينام. في الحقيقة، هو يحب الأفلام الأمريكية كثيرا.

أسئلة Questions

أ- اقرؤوا النص و اجيبوا عن الأسئلة التالية

A- Read the text and answer the following questions:

1. عن ماذا يتكلم النص؟

2. أين يسكن أحمد؟

2. متى تخرج أحمد من كلية السياحة و الفنادق؟

3. ماذا يعمل والد أحمد؟

4. ما اسم والدة أحمد؟ و ماذا كانت تعمل؟

5. كم أختا لأحمد؟ و ما اسمهن؟

3. كيف يذهب أحمد إلى العمل؟ و لماذا؟

ب- ضعوا علامة صح (✓) أمام العبارة الصحيحة و علامة خطأ (×) أمام العبارة الخاطئة.

B- Put (✓) in front of the correct answer and (×) in front of the wrong one

1. أحمد يسكن في تونس. ()

2. تخرج أحمد من كلية التجارة. ()

3. كانت والدة أحمد معلمة في مدرسة ثانوية. ()

4. والد أحمد يعمل مترجما. ()

5. لأحمد أخت واحدة فقط. ()

6. يسكن أحمد مع أسرته. ()

7. أحمد لا يعمل يوم الإثنين. ()

مهارة الكتابة Writing

- اكتبوا في موضوع واحد فقط من الموضوعات التالية (300 كلمة).

-Write 300 words in **one** of the following topics:

- (1) اكتبوا عن أنفسكم وعائلتكم و دراستكم.
- (2) كيف يحتفل الناس بالاعیاد في بلدكم. اختاروا عيداً من الاعیاد الكبيرة في أمريكا و اكتبوا عن العادات و التقالید الخاصة بهذا العيد و كيف يحتفل الناس به.
- (3) اكتبوا عن أجمل رحلة قمتم بها. إلى أين سافرتم و كم من الوقت قضيتم؟ ما هي الأماكن التي قمتم بزيارتها؟ ما هي الأشياء التي استمتعتم بها في الرحلة؟