

College-Level Arabic Heritage Learners: Do they belong in Separate Classrooms?

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Abstract

Arabic heritage language learners have different skills, needs, and reasons to study the language than true beginners. This study highlights these elements, justifying heritage language learners' placement into classes specifically addressing these issues. While both types of Arabic learners strive to learn the same language, heritage learners almost certainly bring some cultural background and linguistic skills to the classroom, often giving them an advantage over second language learners. In order to appreciate and understand the unique qualities these students have, a 16-item survey was administered to incoming college-level heritage students for three consecutive academic years. It was designed to capture language background, exposure, skills and needs, and students' reasons for studying Arabic. Addressing the needs of heritage speakers of Arabic in the classroom will allow them to reach higher proficiency levels at an accelerated rate. Ignoring these qualities will ultimately lead to high attrition rates.

Introduction

The field of heritage language instruction is relatively new in SLA. However, bilingualism and multilingualism have existed in the US since early immigrants arrived to America. Although the rapid switch to English dominated the early years in the history of this nation, languages other than English have managed to survive linguistic loss in recent years, paving the road to this new discipline. As Pratt (2003) reminds us, immigration today is different from what it was in the past. Recent immigrants have, in general, maintained contact with their respective homelands, whereas in the past immigrants seemed to have “a permanent break” with their previous lives (p.113). The need to transform immigrants’ offspring into native English speakers has been the reason many parents and educators have discouraged the use of the home language. Many researchers believe that this unfortunate outcome can be corrected, especially since the demand for fluent foreign language speakers has increased. I genuinely agree with Cummins’ (2005) ironic statement that “we are faced with the bizarre scenario of schools successfully transforming fluent speakers of foreign languages into monolingual English speakers, at the same time as they struggle, largely unsuccessfully, to transform English monolingual students into foreign language speakers” (p. 586).

The consensus among researchers now is that maintaining these “home languages,” or heritage languages is an asset. According to Valdés (2000), heritage speakers are “raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken” and “who speak...or understand... the heritage language” and are “to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language” (p. 1). Bilingualism does not necessarily mean, as commonly believed, that the individual must have equal strengths in all language skills; rather, their linguistic abilities range from one extreme to the other (Valdés, 2005, p. 414; Polinsky and Kagan, 2007, p. 371). As hyphenated American students go through the educational system, their proficiency in English grows dramatically, while their proficiency in their heritage languages varies considerably from one person to another. English often becomes their dominant language. However, many opt to study their ancestral

language at college, if not before. As Wang and Green (2001) stated, institutions have only recently recognized the needs of heritage learners as distinct from the pool of foreign language learners. Since the presence of heritage learners in the foreign language classroom is often intimidating to true beginners, colleges and universities are beginning to develop separate classrooms for heritage learners (Klee, 2000). This has not always been feasible, because the number of students attending such classes does not always justify the expense. Scholars argue that HLLs' (heritage language learners') skills (what they know), needs (what they do not know), and reasons for studying the language are noticeably different from those of L2Ls. My findings, although preliminary, show that HLLs bring many degrees of linguistic and cultural background to the classroom that give them an advantage over true beginners to warrant placement into separate classes specifically addressing these issues. Since mixed classes are a reality in most universities, Abuhakema (2012) argued that there is no harm in them, because, although they have disadvantages, they also have certain advantages.

According to the Arab American Institute, there are at least 3.5 million Arab Americans in the United States. Bale (2010) presented a thorough history of immigration from Arabic speaking countries to the United States. According to his research, small numbers of Arabic speakers arrived in America as far back as the 17th century, which was later increased by the slave trade. However, waves of immigration did not begin in earnest until the late 19th century, although numbers fell between the two world wars. Subsequently, major waves of immigration corresponded to political and economic crises in the Arab world (pp. 128-129). The 2000 US Census Bureau reported that the Arab American population increased 40% during the 1990s, and the 2006-2010 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates showed an increase of 76% since 1990. These new immigrants come with a wealth of linguistic abilities and, theoretically, maintain continual cultural and, in some cases, linguistic ties with earlier immigrant families, who, in turn, benefit from these renewed connections. Accordingly, there is a large pool of heritage speakers of Arabic that are considered potential Arabic learners in formal foreign language classrooms.

A number of studies have included HLLs of Arabic, whether exclusively or as part of a wider group. Carreira and Kagan's (2011) study was based on a survey conducted by the National Heritage Language Resource Center (NHLRC) in 2007-09, with a total of 1,732 participants representing 22 languages from a wide range of institutions. The general profile of all HLLs appeared to be that of a learner who acquired English in early childhood after the HL; had limited exposure to the HL; had some proficiency in speaking and listening; had positive experiences with the culture; and studied the HL for communicative/ identity reasons (p. 62). Among the participants surveyed were 10 Arabic HLLs in a large public university: four were foreign-born and the rest were U.S.-born" (p. 55). Six out of 10 students considered themselves having either low or no proficiency in reading and writing skills; whereas eight out of 10 considered themselves advanced listeners and speakers.

Husseinali (2006) surveyed heritage and non-heritage Arabic students, albeit only at one major university. He investigated the initial motivation of 120 learners in Arabic classes. He divided them into two groups based on their "cultural affinity" to Arabic. Thus, his heritage group of 50 students consisted of both Arab descendants and non-Arab Muslims. Only 23 students were of Arab descent; however, he states that "66% agreed that they are learning Arabic because of their own Arabic culture" (p. 404), which is interesting, since only a little less than half of his HLLs were of Arab descent. In other words, some non-Arab HLLs identified with Arab culture, possibly because Arabic is central to their religious upbringing.

Kenny (1992) reported on his findings of a survey collecting social-linguistic information on 28 heritage students in a high school in Dearborn, Michigan. He studied attitudes towards the language as well as student skills and reasons for studying Arabic. Out of the 28 students, all but two were of Arab descent. The profile revealed that HLLs have strong listening skills with the majority reporting strong speaking skills as well (p. 133). Since these students are learning Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in class, they considered their speaking skills the least important to develop, and the majority

reported that developing their listening skills was a high priority (pp. 133-135). This seemingly peculiar prioritization could reflect the need to understand Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) more than to speak it, since their spoken language is a dialect. Their strong listening and speaking skills indicated by the profile, show their skills in dialect not in MSA. As for why the students were studying Arabic, their most popular reason was to read and understand the Quran and other religious texts, followed by literature and culture, to talk to Arabs, and finally, to speak to their families (pp. 133-134).

Seymoure-Jorn's (2004) study included a survey of 15 Arab-American college students in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Almost half reported strong listening skills but low speaking skills (p. 114). Less than one third reported a desire to improve their speaking skills (p. 115). As for other reasons, like Kenny above, reading the Quran was the number one priority for half of the students. Other motives included cultural and religious identity, "native" language, and fitting in with family members and society at large, both in the US and abroad (p. 121).

While research on Arabic as a heritage language grows, it is still at its infancy in comparison to research on other heritage languages. Studies using surveys, such as those mentioned above, capture certain features that should be generalizable. However, due to the small numbers of participants in these studies, more surveys are needed to provide support and corroborate earlier studies.

The Study

This study examined the needs, reasons, and linguistic levels of Arabic heritage students at a major university. It did so by analyzing results from a survey administered to Arabic students in their first-year instruction of Arabic in three consecutive academic years. The 16-item survey was designed to capture demographic and language background information on heritage learners. It sought five types of information:

- I. General information. This included name, address, and age of participants (cover page).

- II. Language-related background. This included ethnic background, nationality (Q1), and place of birth (Q2).
- III. Language exposure and language learning. This included exposure to any form of Arabic (Q3), a dialect (Q5-6), Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or Classical Arabic (the last two are referred to as fuṣḥā) (Q8-9), or through travel (Q10). Students also indicated their age at time of exposure to any dialect (Q4) and/or (fuṣḥā) (Q7).
- IV. Self-assessment. Students were asked to rate their ability in Arabic, in a dialect or in (fuṣḥā) before attending college (Q12-14).
- V. Reasons and expectations. The students were asked to comment on their reasons for studying fuṣḥā Arabic (Q11) and what they considered important to accelerate their knowledge of the language (Q15-16).

Subjects

Out of the three-year total of 293 students, 20%, or 57 students, were identified by their instructors as having been exposed to Arabic before attending college. After completing the survey 35%, or 20 students, were identified as Arab Americans. Their reported age range was 19-22 years old, 15 females and 5 males. One major factor investigated was whether their interest in Arabic and/or their language abilities in Arabic had any correlation with how long learners' families had been in the United States. The data indicated that the majority of Arab-American students (13) were first-generation Arab Americans (first US-born), one was second-generation, and three were third-generation. Three students neglected to answer this question. The first-generation majority had recent ties to their heritage through at least one parent. However, the fact that at least 20% who were not first-generation still had interest in pursuing Arabic was worthy of note. The importance of reconnecting with their heritage has somehow stimulated these students to learn the language their recent ancestors spoke.

Findings and Discussion

The discussion that follows focuses on students' previous exposure to Arabic, their reasons for studying Arabic, and their needs and expectations. Their previous exposure to Arabic showed to what they were exposed, how they were exposed, and what skills they gained from this exposure. Their reasons for studying Arabic revealed what brought them to the classroom in the first place. Their expectations were what they needed to keep them enrolled in the Arabic classroom. Whatever skills they brought to class and the reasons why they were in class should be validated in the class. What educators find in HLL education in general is high attrition rates due to instructors' focus on what HLLs lack, and not what they already have.

Previous Exposure to Arabic

Studies have shown that maintaining language contact, or lack thereof, directly correlated with language proficiency (Kondo-Brown, 2001, p. 450; Kim, 2006, p. 185). Kim (2006) found in her study that language contact predicts students' HL fluency. The more contact/use, the higher the proficiency (p. 186). The majority of those who had high proficiency test scores reported that they use Korean in a variety of contexts. While other variables contributed to higher proficiency scores, language "... use was the only variable that *significantly* predicted the proficiency test score" [emphasis added] (p. 185). Landry and Allard (1991) showed that in bilingual language development, linguistic contact included socio-structural factors involving an individual network of linguistic contact (INLC), which "consists of interpersonal contacts, contact through the media, and educational support" (p. 204).

For this study, participants were asked to report on previous contact with Arabic prior to formal education at the college level to illustrate any formal or informal factors that assisted in the development of their linguistic abilities. The data suggested that these heritage learners had been exposed to at least one INLC: interpersonal contacts, where participants interacted with family

members and friends and/or visited a country where Arabic is spoken. The form of language this “contact” provided was a regional dialect, since dialects are the spoken form of Arabic. MSA or *fushā* contact falls under either contact through the media, and/or educational support of the INLC model.

Dialect vs. *fushā*. Gee (1998) defined primary discourse, in terms of language education, as “the birth right of every human” (p. 55), which is the result of interaction with family, friends, and close social circles, i.e. dialects spoken at home and with family and friends. Primary discourse serves as the building block or foundation for secondary discourse, which is used beyond the realm of familiar discourse, of public life, and of academia. Since the spoken form of Arabic at home is a dialect, dialects serve as the language of primary discourse. What typical heritage students of Arabic strive to learn in the classroom is secondary discourse, i.e. *fushā*. Since they have, to various degrees, relatively strong foundations in their dialects, the road to *fushā* should build upon these foundations of similar phonology, syntax, and lexicon.¹ These students’ proficiency in primary discourse is by no means ideal. They still need to strengthen their individual dialects in addition to learning *fushā* for secondary discourse. Even though Arabic HLLs in the US come from different dialect backgrounds, they all struggle to learn Standard Arabic, not their own dialects, where they have some proficiency. Since this diglossic situation is the same situation faced by native speakers of Arabic in their respective homelands, without exception, it cannot be ignored in the diaspora; and therefore, must be accepted as part of the process of learning Arabic. The fact that Standard Arabic is different from regional dialects is a problem faced by all learners of Arabic: native, heritage, and foreign language learners alike. The challenge for educators is to accept the differences these HLLs have as compared to native Arabs, who also come to class knowing a dialect, and to find ways to reach this new student population. Arabic HLLs strive to learn *fushā* similarly to native Arabs; yet, unlike native Arabs, HLLs’ spoken dialect skills are not fully developed.

This study shows that a number of HLLs were exposed to only a dialect and some to both a dialect and *fuṣḥā*. Eight students out of 20 reported limited exposure to *fuṣḥā* before formal instruction; five of these were first-generation Arab Americans. The majority of these students were exposed to *fuṣḥā* for religious purposes.² On the other hand, 12 students out of 20 had no exposure to *fuṣḥā* prior to formal instruction. Eight of these students were first-generation. Even with recent immigrants, one sees a clear decline in their children's exposure to the formal language. Since *fuṣḥā* is used in literary and formal situations, which are absent in most home environments, this drastic decline in linguistic abilities is natural. However, the children seem to do relatively better with dialects, as the data suggest.

All but one student were exposed to at least one dialect. This student was a third-generation Arab American and had lost touch with her Arab heritage. All those exposed to a dialect rated their general ability in a dialect: five students rated themselves as having "Good" abilities, seven students had "Fair" abilities, and seven students rated themselves as having "Very Limited" abilities. The data revealed that there was no correlation between the students' general ability in a dialect and the amount of time their families had been in the United States, i.e., what generation Americans they were. Five students out of the seven who reported limited abilities were first-generation Arab Americans, five students out of the seven who reported "fair" were also first-generation, and three students out of the five who reported "Good" abilities were all first-generation Arab Americans. The assumption that first-generation HLLs have higher linguistic skills might appear true, due to their families' recent immigration, but families vary considerably in maintaining their language at home.

Some Arabic language educators in the US believe that teaching a heritage class with mixed dialects is daunting. This important issue is beyond what this study aims to do and should be dealt with in depth separately. For the purpose of exposure to Arabic, in any form, participants were asked to write in the name(s) of the

dialect(s) with which they have had familiarity. Their answers reflected that three students were exposed to Iraqi, nine students to Lebanese, four students to Palestinian, three students to Levantine, three students to Egyptian, one student to Moroccan, one student to Tunisian, and one student reported no exposure at all (third-generation). Two students reported exposure to two dialects: one student to Lebanese and Iraqi and the other to Lebanese and Palestinian, and two other students reported exposure to three dialects: one to Levantine, Egyptian, and Tunisian, and the other to Levantine, Egyptian, and Moroccan, all of which were reflected in the numbers above. It is important to clarify that students were asked to “write” the name(s) of the dialect(s), thus, the answers include Levantine, Palestinian, and Lebanese, which were kept separate to indicate students’ individual answers: some students chose to use either the word “Levantine” or more specifically, chose “Palestinian” or “Lebanese.” However, since Palestinian and Lebanese are also Levantine dialects, the data showed that 65% of students were exposed to at least one Levantine dialect.

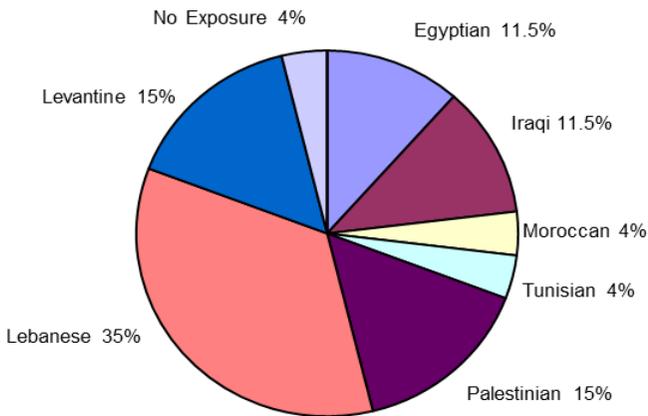


Figure 1. Dialect distribution reflects students' individual answers; thus, Palestinian, Lebanese, and Levantine are represented separately.

Quantity and quality of exposure. Students were asked to report on the amount of exposure they had had to a dialect. Fifteen students had contact with Arabic often or on a daily basis, three did not have contact often or had contact when with extended family, and two did not report their exposure. Those who had had daily contact with a dialect reported exposure through at least one parent and/or friends and relatives. Of the 15 participants who had contact daily or often with a dialect, 10 students reported exposure by both parents in addition to other relatives or friends, and five students reported exposure by one parent in addition to other relatives or friends.

Students were also asked to rate their listening comprehension and speaking abilities before attending college. Those who had had daily exposure to a dialect reported various degrees of listening comprehension and speaking abilities in a dialect on a scale of (1-5), 1 being weakest and 5 the strongest. Out of the 15 students who reported daily exposure, only one neglected to report on his or her abilities. As figure 2 shows, 10 students reported higher listening skills. The other four reported equal listening and speaking skills. All 10 participants who had exposure by both parents reported at least a “2” in at least one ability.

These data indicated a very important characteristic in heritage learners. Their listening abilities are either equal to or superior to their speaking abilities. Educators should be aware of this, since listening comprehension is considered one of the hardest skills to develop with foreign language learners,³ especially if these educators are only accustomed to teaching L2Ls. Course methodology and material should reflect this major difference.

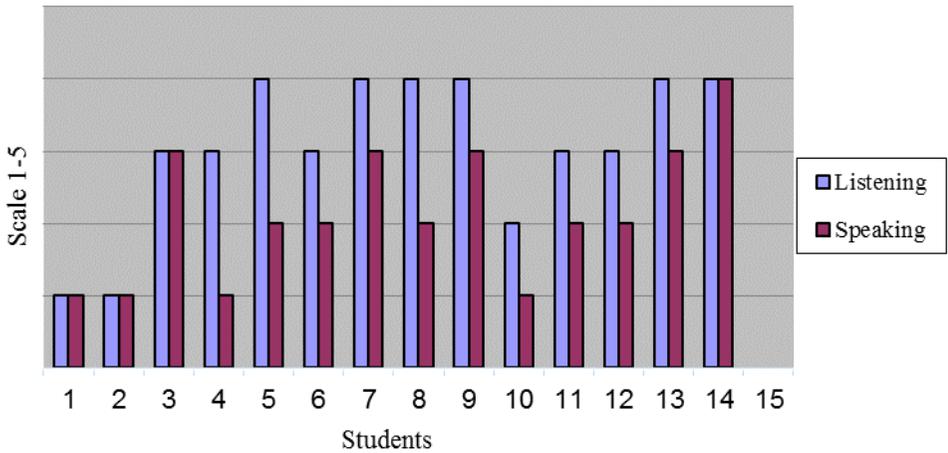


Figure 2. Listening and speaking abilities of students with daily exposure. All but one reported their perceived skills.

Of the three students who did not have significant contact with the language, two were exposed through one parent and/or other relatives and friends, and only one reported exposure through grandparents. These students with less contact also reported their listening and speaking abilities. They all reported minimum abilities: “1” in listening and “1” in speaking.

In addition to language contact with family and friends in the US, language contact through traveling to the Arab world is also considered a positive exposure to the language, since, in the majority of cases, traveling to and immersing in the target culture yields significant input for advancing linguistic abilities in general. In this study, students were asked to report on their travels to the Arab world and rate their perceived listening and speaking skills. Out of the 20 students surveyed, four reported never being there, four reported living there for some time in the past (ranging from time during infancy to one summer vacation), and the majority, 11 students, reported visiting at intervals. Regrettably, one student

neglected to report on this point. All but one, who reported repeated travels at intervals, showed at least a “3” in listening, and the majority reported at least a “2” in speaking.

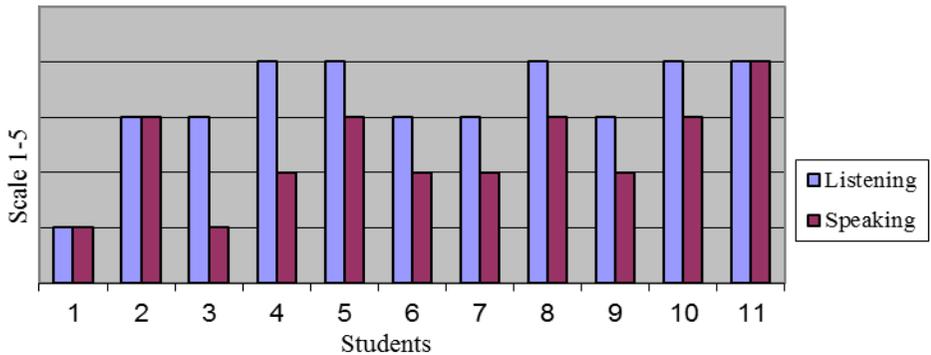


Figure 3. Listening and speaking abilities of students who travelled often to Arab countries

When comparing listening and speaking abilities among the eight students who did not report traveling to the Arab world at intervals or have never been there, only two first-generation Arab Americans had more than minimal abilities: one reported a “2” in speaking and a “4” in listening, and the other participant reported a “1” in speaking and a “2” in listening. These two students had exposure to a dialect through both parents on a daily basis. The other six did not have exposure to Arabic through both parents. Whereas multiple visits to the region increased linguistic abilities in most cases, exposure to the language from both parents also achieved somewhat similar results.

These findings corroborate other studies that have established that HLLs have high listening skills (see, for example, Carreira & Kagan, 2011; Kenny, 1992; Kim, 2006; Kondo-Brown, 2005; Lee, 2005; Polinsky & Kagan, 2007; and Seymour-Jorn, 2004), and, to some extent, more than average speaking skills (see, for example, Carreira & Kagan, 2011; Kenny, 1992; and Polinsky &

Kagan, 2007). Given that heritage students' language skills brought to the class differ from language to language, scholars have also found that heritage language students do have an advantage in more than just listening and speaking skills, such as pronunciation, vocabulary (see, for example, Campell & Rosenthal, 2000; and Polinsky & Kagan, 2007), and grammar (see, for example, Campell & Rosenthal, 2000; Kondo-Brown, 2005; and Schwarzer & Petró, 2005). In the case of Arabic, the language brought to the classroom is a dialect (in whatever form it is); thus all these skills reflect students' knowledge in a dialect, rather than the standard language taught in the classroom. Nevertheless, their skills in listening, speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar of a dialect, if any, is in direct parallel to their native counterparts in Arab countries, albeit to a much lesser degree. This, in turn, does not mean that Arabic HLLs do not find difficulties in one skill or another. In fact, studies have shown that HLLs often have misconceptions regarding their language abilities, which frequently leads to frustration and sometimes attrition (see, for example, Kim, 2006, pp. 178, 191-192; and Schwarzer & Petró, 2005, p. 572).

Language Learner Initial Motivation or Orientation

Gardner and Lambert (1972) elaborated on the concepts of integrative and instrumental orientations in second language learner motivation. Briefly stated, integrative orientations refer to the desire to have contact with the people and culture of the target language, whereas instrumental orientations refer to occupational reasons for learning the language (p. 3). Husseinali (2006) pointed to the fact that many scholars confuse "motivation" with "orientation" and use them interchangeably (p. 397). In fact Robert C. Gardner has written extensively to clarify the use of both terms as they apply to the socio-educational model of second language acquisition (see, for example, Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991; Gardner & Tremblay, 1994; and Gardner, 2010). Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) stated that "orientations refer to reasons for studying a second language, while motivation refers to the directed, reinforced effort to learn the language" (p. 58). Gardner further elaborated that motivation encompasses at least three elements: desire to learn the language,

attitude towards the language and effort exerted towards learning the language (Gardner 2010, p. 9). Crookes and Schmidt (1991) also pointed to the use of the term “motivation” by practitioners not as the reason for studying a language, but to the degree students interact with the language in and out of class (p. 480). In either case, motivation and orientation refer to two different notions and are not interchangeable, although some scholars use the term “initial motivation” as a suitable synonym for orientation. This study deals with students’ orientations or initial motivations in learning their heritage language.

However, other scholars found that not all initial motivations fall under the integrative/instrumental orientations. Suleiman’s (1991) study surveyed five non-heritage Arabic students studying at the advanced level. He found that participants in his study, although small in number, had “neither instrumental nor integrative [orientations], but rather intellectual and personal” ones (p. 100). Husseinali (2006) found that AFL students, heritage and non-heritage, have four different kinds of initial motivation: travel and world culture, political, instrumental, and cultural identity orientations (pp. 406-407). His study showed that heritage learners have significantly more reasons to study Arabic for identification motives than non-heritage learners. While the heritage students additionally had instrumental orientations, the non-heritage group indicated more instrumental reasons than the heritage group (p. 406). (He excluded college requirement from this study).

Kim’s (2006) study on 120 Korean heritage students revealed that the majority had very strong integrative reasons (communication with parents, relatives and friends, as well as maintaining ethnic and cultural identity) to study their mother tongue (p. 193). However, unlike Husseinali above, she considered ‘identity’ as integrative orientation. Although his classification could be considered integrative as well, he did not classify it as such. In fact, Crookes and Schmidt (1991), in their overview of relevant studies on motivation in and out of SL research, stressed that there is no consensus on the definition of integrative motivation (orientation) (p. 475). Reynolds, Howard, and Deak (2009) also indicated that HLLs, both narrow and

broad,⁴ have higher integrative reasons to study their respective HLs than non-HLLs, but that broad HLLs had similar research, career, and travel orientations to non-HLLs (p. 261).

As previously reported, both Kenny (1992) and Seymoure-Jorn's (2004) found that one of the most important reasons to study Arabic, in their studies, was to read and understand the Quran and other religious texts. These two studies were conducted within participants' respective communities, Dearborn, Michigan and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Thus, their motives might reflect a desire that the community as a whole strives to achieve. These students live in tight-knit communities, with continuous recent immigrants, who generally have been more exposed to religious revivals back home. Identity and cultural affinities run strong in these two groups.

Students in this study were asked to write their reasons for studying Arabic. Some answers consisted of a few words, such as "heritage," "religion" or "family," and some answers were sentence-length. One student wrote, "I wish to learn to command a language I've heard growing up but never mastered." Another wrote, "I have always wanted to, and I want to be able to communicate w/family and be able to speak if I go to the Arab world." A third student wrote, "I want to be able to work with people in the Middle East. I also want to be able to read primary sources in my academic pursuits. And, of course, it's a beautiful language that I want to master." The open-ended nature of this question allowed for multiple responses. The most frequent response was "to live/work/study" in the Arab world, followed by "communication with family," and then "heritage" and "language," which tied at third place. Only one student reflected pure instrumental orientation. This student had minimal exposure to Arabic before her post-secondary education, had never been to the Arab world, and only heard Arabic from grandparents. All others had either integrative orientations or a combination. Seven logical categories emerged from students' responses in this study. The following chart illustrates these categories.

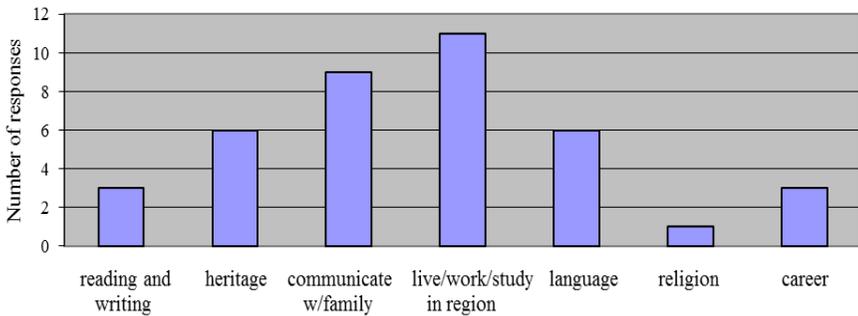


Figure 4. Reasons for studying Arabic reflect integrative and instrumental orientations

Experience, Needs and Expectations

Since educators of HLLs, for the most part, believe that their students' grammar needs to improve, their classes often turn into grammar classes, which, in turn, students consider boring. Kagan (2005)⁵ found that traditional HLLs in her study, who have been attending class for eight weeks, had more spelling mistakes than non-HLLs who had been taking Russian for at least three years, yet both groups were making similar grammatical mistakes (pp. 216-217). Nonetheless, Schwarzer and Petrón (2005) found that students did not appreciate grammar instruction in their study, which resulted in the students' lack of interest in further Spanish classes (p. 572). Their three students "were in agreement that explicit grammar instruction was of little use" (p. 574). Kim (2006) questioned the usefulness of teaching grammar, since some students might become unsatisfied with the amount of time it takes to become fluent in the "standard" language: this alone put them at a disadvantage psychologically (pp. 178, 191-192).

Studies have shown that students' preferences differ. While Schwarzer and Petrón (2005) found their students preferred extensive speaking in class to contextualize their vocabulary or improve their

cultural proficiency (p. 574), Kenny (1992) found that his subjects considered Modern Standard Arabic listening comprehension the most important, followed by reading and writing (p. 133). Since MSA is not natively spoken by any Arab, and, thus, they are not exposed to it as regularly as its colloquial counterparts, this explains why Kenny's subjects gave such importance to MSA listening comprehension. Yet, students' lack of interest in improving their speaking skills might be because spoken Arabic is in the domain of dialects and not the standard language.

In this study, students had the opportunity to comment on what they thought had been the most important skills to accelerate their language abilities in their formal college education. One student reported that vocabulary had been the most important. He wrote, "Sheer memorization of vocab, which translates into repetition upon repetition of saying and listening to Arabic words." However, the most frequent response was "speaking" followed by "vocabulary." "Reading" tied with "writing" in third place. The chart below illustrates the rate of importance given by students to what they have been taught in class. Speaking is not only the most important skill taught, but it far exceeds vocabulary. Even if HLL students come to the classroom with some speaking ability in a dialect, they find it extremely important to advance their speaking skill in *fushā*. However, their listening skill did not seem to be of high importance to them, probably since understanding *fushā* by an HLL does not seem to be difficult.

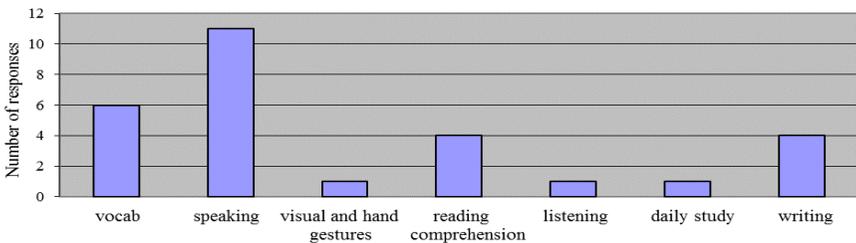


Figure 5. Most important skills students found in their Arabic instruction

Students were also asked to share what else they believed they needed in their Arabic classroom to maximize their knowledge in Arabic in the shortest time. Most students gave lengthy answers with multiple suggestions. One student wrote, “I would use media to increase vocabulary as long as there were vocab lists and/or an explanation alongside it...I would also need formal grammar lessons.” Another student wrote, “learning how to speak - learning as much relevant vocab and grammar as possible in order to speak well.” As shown in the chart below, eight different categories were coded from reading student responses. The most frequent response was “vocabulary”; second came “speaking”; followed by “grammar.” Although, in the previous paragraph, HLLs believed that “speaking” is the most important skill taught in the classroom, they felt that more vocabulary was needed, and, in addition, the need to use new vocabulary in speaking was also high. It is surprising here to find students placing grammar as the third most important skill to maximize their language learning, since other studies, as shown earlier, have shown that focusing on grammar in the language classroom frustrates students and often leads to dropping language study. This might be because of students’ realization that *fuṣḥā* is different from their dialects, and thus has a slightly different grammar, and/or they might be internalizing the importance given to grammar by their teachers. In either case, with these Arabic HLLs, grammar was important.

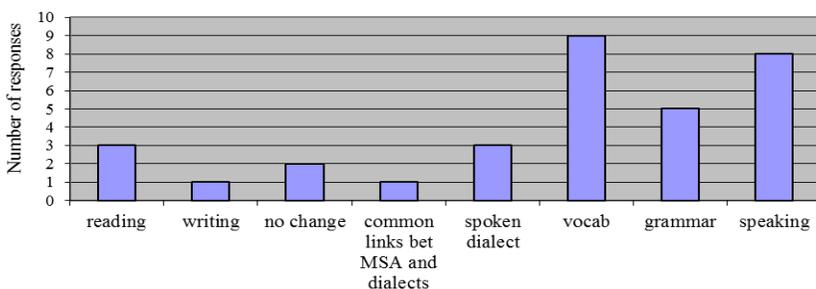


Figure 6. Students’ wish list of areas where they believed they needed more help

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

The main limitation of the study was the small number of participants. The fact that this study was conducted at one university limited the number of participants to those who are enrolled in first-year Arabic classes at one university. Studies at more universities, thus, adding more participants would give a more reliable profile that a single study at one university cannot. Another limitation was the self-assessment of participants' abilities in Arabic. The study counted participants' perceptions of their skills, not their actual proficiency. Students' perceptions of their abilities differ. A more reliable proficiency test conducted with the same parameters and standards would better judge participants' levels. A final limitation, one I thought of after concluding the study, was the input of participants' instructors. How do instructors perceive HLLs skills and needs, and whether instructors account for differences in the classroom? However, this might seem intrusive if instructors think these questions are criticizing their methods or their classroom management. Anonymous surveys rather than interviews could very well seek instructors' input, but, at one university, anonymity might not be possible.

In addition to addressing limitations above, studies documenting actual practices and comparing language acquisition between HLLs and L2Ls that are in separate classrooms and are tailored to each group's needs and skills, are the next logical step. The issue of multiple dialects in the same classroom is an important study that will add to educators' understanding of how to handle such situations. Additionally, if offering separate classrooms is not an option, do instructors employ differentiated instruction to accommodate HLLs?

Conclusion

Although this study was conducted at one university, nonetheless, it supports and reinforces other studies that contribute to creating a general profile of Arabic heritage learners in the United States. The most important aspect to emerge is that the amount of

language exposure heritage learners experience, through both of their parents and/or travel to Arab countries, directly contributes to their perception of their relatively more advanced skills in the language, corroborating existing literature. In some cases, however, even with similar exposure, HLL perceived abilities remain minimal. This clearly means that there are different variables that affect language learning other than exposure. However, higher linguistic abilities are often associated with more exposure. On the other hand, one needs to take into account individual learners' orientations and needs to account fully for these varying results. Most students in this study started their pursuit of Arabic for various reasons, but the majority indicated some form of interaction with the people and culture of the region. This alone does not necessarily differ from second language learners' reasons. The key distinction, however, is that heritage learners usually interact with people they know, family and friends who also serve as a built-in support system not usually available for second language learners. This by itself gives HLLs an advantage over L2Ls. Similarly, HLLs' experience and needs in this study do not differ significantly from L2Ls. Speaking, vocabulary, reading, and writing are skills all language learners seek to improve. The difference resides in the starting point for each group, which varies, and therefore, their needs will be different by degrees. The most important need, however, is to nurture the reasons that brought HLLs to the classroom and to encourage them to develop more reasons to continue learning Arabic. Attention to this important, often neglected, need would drastically cut attrition rates, a fact most heritage language programs face.

Addressing HLL skills, listening comprehension is the strongest skill among heritage learners in general, with speaking a not-to-distant second. Arabic HLLs are no exception. This is the case with all participants, whether first-, second-, or third-generation, whether they travel to the Arab world, and whether they are exposed to Arabic by both parents or just one. Arabic heritage learners will come to the classroom with some skill in listening in a dialect. This will require special attention and awareness from instructors if they are accustomed only to the second language learner, since, in most cases, listening comprehension is the last skill to develop with this

group of learners. Instructors also need to feel comfortable in a multi-dialect classroom, since HLLs' speaking skills, if any, will be in a dialect. The fact that these skills are mostly in a dialect should not be treated as something that should be unlearned. Educators should focus on the similarities these dialects have to *fuṣḥā*, not the differences; this often happens in the classroom. The fact that there are different dialects represented in the heritage class is a cultural and linguistic experience most native speakers do not learn first-hand. Yes, difficulties in understanding will be present, but the fact is that most speakers of Arabic will face this at one time or another in their lifetime. HLLs are often exposed to these differences from the beginning of their formal study.

In order to effectively design a class for heritage learners, educators must take into consideration students' needs and orientations, using sound pedagogical principles to address their varying linguistic skills, and must build on what students know, not focusing on what they do not know. They come to class with some skills that should be validated, not dismissed as "incorrect Arabic." Anything less will run the risk of considerable attrition rates.

Heritage speakers come to the language classroom with basic abilities that can accelerate their performance. Instructors should help them use what they have in the most efficient and productive manner, with the understanding that students will come with different abilities in spoken variants. Placing them in a classroom with specifically designed materials where they can maximize their learning experience will enable them to reach higher proficiency rates in less time in a more favorable environment, and encourage them to reach even more advanced levels. If HLLs must remain in classes with second language learners, educators should understand the unique qualities and abilities HLLs bring to the classroom and modify their instruction to this group of students accordingly.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Karin Ryding and Dr. Scott McGinnis for their support and guidance in the initial stages of this study, which was partially funded by the National Resource Center on the Middle East Title VI.

Notes

1. Byrnes (2002) explained in her analysis of current language teaching practices that the focus of most European language instruction has been primary discourse. Unfortunately, as Ryding (2006) stated, Arabic foreign language instruction in America has been subject to what she called “reverse privileging,” where secondary discourse of literature and academia has been the focus of instruction, rather than primary discourse of familiarity.
2. These students are not to be confused with Muslim Americans who have had no exposure to a dialect.
3. Rubin (2009) explained that listening is difficult for L2 students for several reasons: 1) listeners are at the mercy of the speaker; 2) they have almost no control over what, how, and how quickly, it is going to be said; 3) transient spoken words “come at” listeners very fast and are gone; 4) processing requirements are very heavy: listeners must do it while it is happening—no time for reflection; 5) heavy processing load means that learners lose concentration rather quickly; and 6) beginning learners do not have the background knowledge to help them process auditory texts.
4. Polinsky and Kagan (2007) assigned two labels to differentiate between types of HLLs. Narrowly defined HLLs are those who have some proficiency in the language. Broadly defined HLLs are those who are interested in the language for cultural and/or emotional reasons, without displaying any linguistic competencies.
5. Kagan (2005) divided her HLLs into three groups: those who completed secondary schools in Russian; those who had five

to seven years of schooling in Russian; and those who either immigrated to the US during elementary school, as pre-schoolers, or who were US born (pp. 215-216). This last group is what I have called traditional HLLs.

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