

Arabic Heritage Language Learners: motivation, expectations, competence, and engagement in learning Arabic

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Abstract

This paper investigates *motivation, outcome expectations, competence* and *engagement* of Arabic heritage learners. Fifty students belonging to two distinct groups participated in this study. The first group is comprised of heritage learners coming from Arabic speaking homes (Arab HLLs) while the second group is comprised of non-Arabic speaking Muslims (Muslim HLLs). The study aims to uncover trends amongst Arabic HLLs, therefore, means for the whole group were calculated. In addition to means, t-tests were performed to compare the two groups with regard to motivation, outcome expectations, and competence. Frequencies for engagement items for each group are provided separately.

The results indicate that, on the one hand, Arabic HLLs possess a strong *identity* and *community motivations*. On the hand, their *instrumental* or *utilitarian* motivation is very weak. On the levels of skills, Arabic HLLs are more drawn to study Arabic to improve their communication skills rather than to learn about their heritage culture. In comparison to Muslim HLL, Arab HLLs perceived themselves more competent to achieve speaking proficiency than Muslim HLLs. Muslim HLLs desired to learn more about Islam and Islamic texts than Arab HLLs.

The results of this study are discussed in light of classroom instruction and designing of curricula to match the needs of both groups of HLLs.

Introduction

Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) in the US has gained exponential momentum in the last ten years creating an urgent need and a conducive environment to research the many facets AFL. Research on learning foreign languages, in general, can take on one of the following three forms: language, teaching, and learner. This paper focuses on the learner. More specifically, it targets heritage language learners (HLLs). Research on Arabic as a heritage language and consequently HLLs of Arabic is scant and fairly in the conception stage compared to research on other HLLs such as Spanish, Chinese and Korean.

Besides, altruistic motivations to maintain and preserve heritage languages in the US (Fishman 1991), there are real practical benefits to understanding HLLs of any language. Not least of them, the speed at which HLLs can reach high proficiency levels (Kagan, 2005). Kagan (2005) contends that “HLLs, because of their long exposure to the language, are good candidates for gaining such [professional: superior or higher] proficiency more quickly if the instruction they are offered meets their needs” (p.220). Kagan found out that after eight weeks of instruction, Russian HLLs performance on translation tasks was comparable to that of non-HLLs who have been learning Russian as a foreign language for three or more years. Therefore, in less than one semester, HLLs can reach the same proficiency level that non HLLs can reach in four years. This is a very impressive result. Furthermore, because language, culture and identity are all interconnected, promoting learning of heritage languages will strengthen HLL sense of bicultural identity. Lee (2002) concluded that “in order to enable individuals to experience the benefits of their bicultural identities; it is imperative that we also make provisions to promote the teaching of heritage languages” (p. 132)

This paper attempts to shed light on Arabic HLLs. More specifically, it will focus on their ethnic and cultural background, their motivation, their expectations, their perception of their own abilities, and their engagement in learning Arabic.

Definitions

Although there is a universal agreement that HLLs are different from traditional foreign language learners (Carreira, 2004; Lee, 2005; Valdes, 2005; Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003), the theoretical question of who qualifies as a HLL remains unsettled. Van Deusen-Scholl (2003) differentiates between Heritage language learners and learners with Heritage motivation. The first group comes from a background where the heritage language is spoken at home so they possess some level of linguistic proficiency in the HL, whereas, learners in the second group possess no proficiency in the HL, but they believe themselves to be connected to the heritage culture (HC) and consider learning the HL as the bridge to cross to HC. Van Deusen-Scholl defined a HLL as one who is “bilingual in English and a home language other than English with varying degrees of proficiency in the home language” (p. 221). Van Deusen-Scholl (2003) cited Valdes’s (2001) more elaborate definition of HLLs, according to which HLLs have the following characteristics:

- They are raised in homes where a non-English language is spoken;
- They speak or merely understand the heritage language; and
- They are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language. (p. 221)

Thus, according to the first view discussed above, some exposure to the HL at home is assumed. This definition does not exclude learners with even passive abilities in the HL (merely understand the heritage language). A second view on HLLs gives more prominence to the role of identity that a heritage language can play. Cho, Cho, and Tse (1997) defined heritage language as “the language associated with one’s cultural background and it may or may not be spoken in the home” (p. 106). This definition excludes the proficiency dimension assumed in Valdes’ definition.

Therefore, if we take the linguistically motivated definition of HLLs to Arabic, then we will limit Arabic HLLs to those who come from Arabic speaking homes. But, if we extend the definition of HLLs to include learners who have cultural affinity to Arabic then we will extend our circle of HLLs to include the many Muslim students who take Arabic to connect to religious texts, especially those who

come from homes where the native language of their parents uses Arabic script such as Persian and Urdu. It is common to find Muslim learners of Arabic from Persian or Urdu backgrounds having some level of literacy in Arabic. Muslim students learning Arabic are definitely different from traditional students learning Arabic as a foreign language, because they have at least passive literacy in Arabic gained through their exposure to the Qur'an.

This paper assumes that learners of Arabic can be broadly classified into three groups. The first group consists of traditional language learners with no previous knowledge of Arabic or cultural connection to the language. The second group consists of learners who come from homes where Arabic is spoken. Learners in the second group have a high degree of variation in Arabic proficiency, but all of them have English as their dominant language. The third group consists of non-Arab Muslim learners. Most of the learners in the third group have acquired some basic literacy in Arabic from Sunday schools teaching them how to read the Quran, although not necessarily all might have this capacity.

This study focuses on the latter two groups called here for convenience, Arab HLLs and Muslim HLLs. This study investigates their motivation, their outcome expectations, their competence, and their engagement in learning Arabic.

Curriculum and HLLs motivation

From a practical point of view it might be impractical to mix HLLs with traditional foreign language learners because HLLs have an advantage over the other group (Husseinali, 2006). This advantage can be in terms of linguistic and/or cultural proficiency. Therefore, the next logical step in building a cohesive program would be to offer a separate track to HLLs whenever possible. (Valdes, 2001) identified the challenge in teaching heritage languages to involve "understanding the needs of minority language communities and of particular groups of learners and adapting or developing pedagogical approaches that can bring about the best results" (p.31). Kagan (2005) advocated using classical literature, poetry and films in Russian heritage courses. In addition, she suggested including a cross-cultural perspective to the curriculum which will contribute to higher level discourse skills. In addition to selecting appropriate content for HL

courses, teachers should also pay attention to the communicative mode to be targeted in HL courses. According to Valdes (2001) HLLs come to class with strong *interpersonal mode* of communication, but lacking a developed *interpretative mode* and *presentational mode*. Therefore, instruction in HL should focus on developing these two communicative modes.

There are many studies comparing motivation and needs of HLLs with those of non HLLs (Husseinali, 2006; Lee, 2005; Noels, 2005). Noels (2005) compared motivation of HLLs and non-HLLs of German and found that HLLs differed primarily from non HLLs only on identified orientations. Noels interpreted these results to indicate that learning German for HLLs was important for their self-concept and a desire to be more connected to the German speaking community. Husseinali (2006) found that Arabic HLLs (Arabs and Muslims) differed significantly from non HLLs on both identification and instrumental motivation.

Methods:

Subjects: Fifty students participated in this study. Twenty three of them identified themselves to be of an Arabic heritage. The remaining twenty seven belonged to different ethnic groups but all of them were Muslims. There were twenty seven females and twenty three males. Twenty eight were enrolled in first year and twenty two in second year Arabic.

Instrument: A four-part survey was administered during the middle of the second semester. The first part comprised of sixteen Likert scale items (1= strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) eliciting information about *motivation* to learn Arabic. The second part comprised of six multiple-choice questions eliciting information about *engagement* in learning Arabic. The third part comprised of seven Likert scale items (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree) elicited information about desired *outcomes* from learning Arabic. Finally, the fourth part comprised of seven probability questions (10% to 100%) eliciting information about learners' *competence* to achieve the mentioned outcomes.

Data analysis: Means for motivation variables, outcome variables, and ability variables were calculated to assess the strength of each variable among all HLLs. Then a t-test was performed on the data to determine if there are any significant differences between the two groups with regard to motivation, outcome, and competence. For the six multiple-choice engagement items, frequency of each choice was reported for the whole group combined as well as for each group independently.

Results:

1. Motivation

The average mean for each of the sixteen motivational variables is presented in table 1 below. The results show that Arabic HLLs have high motivation to study Arabic for *identification orientations* (“to understand and appreciate Arabic literature”, “interest in my own Arab culture”, “interest in my Islamic heritage”). They also have high motivation to study Arabic in order to connect with other speakers of Arabic, *community oriented motivation*, (use Arabic when I travel to an Arab country, use it with Arabic speaking friends, meet and converse with more varied people). HLLs are almost neutral on *instrumental motivations* (getting a job, foreign language requirement, studying abroad). Finally HLLs are least motivated to study Arabic as a result of (“events of 9/11”) or because they perceive the class to be “less demanding.”

Table 1: motivation variables’ means for all HLLs (N=50)

I study Arabic in order to/because:	Mean	Std. Dev
1. understand and appreciate Arabic art and Literature	5.1000	1.64441
2. meet and converse with more and varied people	6.0800	1.12195
3. learn more about other cultures to understand the world better	5.3000	1.78714
4. of interest in my own Arab culture	5.1200	2.25551
5. of interest in my Islamic Heritage	5.5600	2.17744
6. of my interest in Islam as a world religion	5.8200	1.64986

7. I feel Arabic is important in the economic development of the world	4.9000	1.94044
8. I feel Arabic will help me better understand the Middle East politics	5.1200	1.73370
9. of the events of 9/11	2.0800	1.42628
10. it will help me better understand the problems that Arabs face	4.0400	2.14723
11. I think it will be useful in getting me a good job	4.8200	2.03731
12. I want to be able to use Arabic with Arabic-speaking friends	5.5200	1.47413
13. I want to use Arabic when I travel to an Arab country	6.2800	1.21286
14. I need to study a foreign language as a requirement for my degree	4.2400	2.47073
15. I feel the class is less demanding than other courses	1.9200	1.53649
16. I plan to study abroad	3.7400	2.35441

Then, t-test was performed to ascertain if the two groups or HLLs, namely Arab HLLs and Muslim HLLs, differ significantly on their motivation to learn Arabic. The two groups differed significantly only regarding three motivational variables as shown in table 2 below. Arab HLLs are more motivated to study Arabic (because of interest in own Arab culture), Muslim HLLs are more motivated to study Arabic (because of their Islamic heritage & because of interest in Islam as world religion)

Table 2: t-test comparing Arab HLLs and Muslim HLLs

I study Arabic in order to/because:	T-test value	df	Sig (2tailed)
Because of interest in my own Arab culture	6.89	48	.000
Because of interest in my Islamic Heritage	-4.00	48	.000
Because of my interest in Islam as a world religion	-2.51	48	.016

2. *Expected outcomes*

The survey elicited responses on seven expected outcomes. The means of each outcome are presented in table 3 below. The highest mean was obtained for (receiving an A grade) outcome with a mean of 6.44. Communicative outcomes (speak Arabic fluently, communicate with native speakers in Arabic, reading comprehension) also scored high with means of 6.24, 6.26, 6.4, respectively. Interestingly, outcomes related to culture and identity (Arabic culture, Islam and relevant texts, Arabs' way of thinking) had the lowest means. These results indicate that HLLs expect to achieve good grades and good communicative and literacy skills. However, their expectations of more abstract outcomes are tuned down.

Table 3: HLLs expected learning outcomes

The most significant outcome I want to get from Arabic class will be:	Mean	Std. Dev.
To speak Arabic fairly fluently	6.2400	1.23817
To communicate with Arabic speakers in basic Arabic	6.2600	1.29063
To develop reading comprehension of Arabic	6.4000	.96890
To receive an "A" grade from the class	6.4400	1.16339
To better understand Arabs and their way of thinking	5.1000	1.89790
To learn more about Arabic culture and customs	5.4800	1.56805
To understand Islam and relevant texts better	5.8800	1.70999

When comparing the two groups with each other using t-test statistic, Muslim HLLs differed significantly from Arab HLLs only regarding the outcome (*understanding Islam and relevant texts better*).

Table 4: t-test comparing Arab HLLs and Muslim HLLs expected outcomes

Item	T-test value	Df	Sig (2tail)
To understand Islam and relevant texts better	-3.32	48	.002

3. Perceived Ability to Achieve Outcomes

HLLs perceived themselves as most capable to (get an A grade, mean=8.4) and to (communicate in basic Arabic, mean= 8.18). They ranked their ability to achieve culture and identity outcomes lower than their ability to achieve linguistic skills. This may be due to the elusive nature of cultural input and assessment of culture in foreign language classes compared to more concrete linguistic outcomes.

Table 5: HLLs competence to achieve outcomes

My own ability to achieve the above outcomes?	Mean	Std. Dev.
To speak Arabic fairly fluently	7.9600	1.60306
To communicate with Arabic speakers in basic Arabic	8.1800	1.54774
To develop reading comprehension of Arabic	7.9400	1.62141
To receive an "A" grade from the class	8.4000	1.45686
To better understand Arabs and their way of thinking	7.1400	2.49088
To learn more about Arabic culture and customs	7.2200	2.41838
To understand Islam and relevant texts better	7.8200	2.06714

When comparing the two groups using t-test statistic, Arab HLLs perceive themselves significantly more competent to achieve (speaking Arabic fluently) and (communicate in basic Arabic) as can be seen in table 6 below. Arab HLLs showed significantly more self-confidence in their ability to achieve these two goals than Muslim HLLs. This is fairly expected giving the proficiency (in speaking) advantage Arab HLLs have over Muslim HLLs.

Table 6: t-test comparing Arab HLLs and Muslim HLLs ability perceptions

Item	T-test valud	Df	Sig (2tail)
To speak Arabic fairly fluently	2.4	48	.021
To communicate with Arabic speakers in basic Arabic	3.2	48	.003

4. Engagement in learning Arabic

The following section presents results on the level of HLLs engagement in learning Arabic in terms of the amount of effort invested in the process, reflection, practice time, class participation, assignment correction and seeking opportunity to speak Arabic. The results in table 7 below point out that most HLLs will exert enough *effort* to learn Arabic. They do not expect learning Arabic to be an effortless endeavor. The majority will *reflect* on what they learned in class at least several times a week. In terms of time invested in learning Arabic, half of the HLLs will spend four hours a week studying Arabic after class. Thirty percent of HLLs will spend more than six hours learning Arabic after class. As for participation in class, fifty percent will participate voluntarily. However, there is a difference between Arab HLLs and Muslim HLLs in this regard. Twice as much percentage of Arab HLLs (69%) will volunteer answers compared to only (33%) of Muslim HLLs. Only twelve percent of HLLs will methodologically follow on feedback on their assignments. Arab HLLs are three times (39%) more likely to (use Arabic outside class) than Muslim HLLs (11%).

Table 7: HLLs engagement in learning Arabic

When I learn a foreign language, I expect:	All HLLs	Arab HLLs	Muslim HLLs
1. I will			
a. Pass on the basis of sheer luck and intelligence	0	0	0
b. Do just enough work to get along	4	9	0
c. Try to learn the language	82	82	81
d. Enjoy doing all the work	14	9	19
2. I will think about the words and ideas, which I have learned in my classes.			
a. Hardly ever	0	0	0
b. Once or twice a week	18	4	29
c. Several times during the week	44	48	41

d. Daily	38	48	29
3. I will spend this much time to practice the language after class			
a. Zero hours	2	0	4
b. One hour/week	14	13	15
c. Four hours/ week	54	56	52
d. More than six hours/ week	30	30	29
4. I will			
a. Not necessarily be active in speaking the language in class	2	0	4
b. Answer the questions when I am called	30	22	37
c. Volunteer answers to the questions which are easy	18	9	26
d. Volunteer answers as much as possible.	50	69	33
5. After I get my Arabic assignments back, I :			
a. Just throw them in my desk	10	9	11
b. Look them over but don't bother correcting mistakes	38	30	44
c. Correct mistakes when I have time	40	48	33
d. Always rewrite them correcting mistakes	12	13	11
6. I will try to speak Arabic after class:			
a. Never	2	0	4
b. Only when I have to	12	4	18
c. When I am offered the opportunity to do so	62	56	67

d. In a wide variety of situations and as much as possible	24	39	11
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Discussion

This study aims to find out the strength of Arabic HLLs motivation, outcome expectations, competence, and engagement in learning Arabic. It also aims to examine if there are any differences between Arab HLLs and Muslim HLLs on all those variables.

The results of this study clearly show strong motivation amongst all Arabic HLLs to learn Arabic for cultural and identity reasons (own Arabic culture, own Islamic heritage). Arabic HLLs are drawn to learn Arabic to connect to their native heritage rather than being exposed to it. On the other hand they are not motivated to learn Arabic for pure utilitarian reasons or as a result of the changing political environment.

In terms of group differences, the results show significant differences between Arab HLLs and Muslim HLLs on two motivational variables. Arab HLLs are significantly more motivated to study Arabic to learn more about Arabic culture than do Muslim HLLs. On the other hand Muslim HLLs are significantly more motivated to learn Arabic to understand Islam better. Thus, while it is attested that HLLs differ from non HLLs in terms of identification motivation (Husseinali 2006, Jin Sook Lee 05, Comanaru 2009), the significant differences between the two HLLs subgroups in this study with regard to identification motivation is new. One group is more interested in general or secular identity connection to Arabic while the other is more interested in religious identity connection. Pedagogically, this means not all HLLs are equally motivated to study Arabic. Some have secular generic cultural motivation such as Arab HLLs; while others have specific religious cultural motivations such as Muslim HLLs. Arabic for heritage learners' courses should distinguish between the two groups. A number of other studies on HL teaching have reached the same conclusions. (Beaudrie, Ducar, & Relano-Pastor (2009) concluded that promoting a sense of self-identity and cultural pride is one of the primary needs of Spanish heritage learners. The authors went on to suggest that Spanish for heritage learners should incorporate "courses whose focus is specifically culturally

based” (p. 171). Kagan (2005) suggested that in order for HL instruction to be effective the content for a typical HL Russian course should include cultural identity enhancers or connectors such as “classical literature, poetry and film”. The findings of this study support this suggestion as far as Arab HLLs are concerned and adds that for Muslim HLLs Islamic identity enhancers or connectors should also be given equal weight. This is a new finding in Arabic heritage teaching.

In terms of learning outcomes, the results show that HLLs valued immediate short term outcomes (getting an A), communicative outcomes (speaking and reading Arabic) more than long term ones (understanding one’s own culture or Islamic heritage). It seems that learners attach more value to reward outcomes. Although this finding may seem contradictory to the earlier one discussed above, it is not necessarily so upon closer examination. Arabic HLLs possess global motivations by being interested in learning more about their identity, but they also have local (classroom) motivation. Besides the global and local dichotomy we can understand the relation between the two motivational variables in term of value. For students the value of connecting to their own culture and identity is important, but the value of learning specific skills is higher. This finding suggests that incorporating culture-based material in heritage courses should not come at the expense of targeting linguistic and communicative skills.

In terms of competence, the results indicate that Arabic HLLs have highest competence with regard to “getting an A grade” and “be able to communicate in basic Arabic.” Understandably, Arab HLLs showed significantly more competence regarding ability to learn to speak Arabic than Muslim HLLs.

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