

Attitudes of Arabic- and Non-Arabic Speaking Parents Toward the Importance of Learning Arabic in the United States

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Abstract

To promote Arabic teaching, researchers examined attitudes and expectations of parents regarding the importance of their children's Arabic study. In four states Researchers surveyed 238 Arabic-speaking and 128 non-Arabic speaking parents of children at urban and suburban schools offering Arabic as part of their mainstream programs. Most parents demonstrated positive attitudes toward language learning. They involved and encouraged their children's Arabic study and involed themselves in it. Arabic-speaking parents believed Arabic important for their children to maintain communication and affinity with family; preserve culture, religion, and traditions; maintain cultural heritage in the United States; and maintain moral and professional values. Non-Arabic speaking parents expressed similar reasons. However, Arabic-speaking parents recognized a wider variety of benefits to learning Arabic. Researchers concluded that parental attitudes toward language learning have great impact on children's learning process, but noted a discrepancy between the attitudes and expectations of Arabic- versus non-Arabic-speaking parents regarding learning Arabic.

Introduction

Arabic is the most widely spoken Semitic language throughout the world. According to Lewis (2009), there are approximately 322 million native Arabic speakers and roughly 422 million total speakers. Since Arabic is also the language of the Qur'an, many people around the world engage with it even if they do not acquire it natively or use it for purposes beyond worship. Husseinali (2006) has categorized learners of Arabic as a foreign language into three distinct groups: heritage language speakers who are of Arab descent; non-heritage speakers who do not have ethnic or cultural ties to the Arabic language; and others who are non-Arab Muslims. In this study, the definition of the term *Arabic-speaking* parents refers to heritage language speakers who are of Arab descent. *Non-Arabic-speaking parents* refers to parents who have no ethnic or cultural ties to the Arabic language; however, they are mostly Muslim.

Since the early 2000s, there has been an increasing call for the teaching and learning of critical languages in the U.S., such as Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Urdu, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Swahili, and Turkish. As one of the consequences of the events of September 11, 2001, teaching Arabic in the U.S. became the focus of more attention from the educational community (Morrison, 2003). Morrison states that while at the time teaching Arabic in U.S. elementary and secondary schools was not nearly as common as the teaching of Western European languages such as French, German, and Spanish, there has been an increasing demand for teaching Arabic, particularly in private and charter schools. According to the Modern Language Association, enrollment in Arabic courses has more than tripled since 2002 (Goldberg, Looney, & Lusin, 2015). Today, Arabic is one of the fastest-growing foreign languages being taught throughout schools in the U.S. (Heldt, 2014).

According to Heldt, the majority of native Arabic speakers resides in heavily urban areas such as Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York. Heldt further indicates that Detroit alone hosts one of the largest populations of Arabs and Arabic speakers in the U.S. from a variety of Middle Eastern and African countries.

Undoubtedly, the population of Arab communities is growing rapidly throughout the country as a result of routine migration and growth of the second generation.

Due to the rapidly growing demands for Arabic learning in the U.S. and as part of a larger plan to strengthen ties with K-12 schools and to promote the teaching of Arabic, as well as to inform future advocacy efforts which promote language learning among students of all ages and their parents, the current study examined the attitudes and expectations of Arabic- and non-Arabic-speaking parents in Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, and Virginia regarding foreign language learning in general and Arabic study in particular. As indicated by Husseinali (2006), research provides prominent evidence that parental attitudes toward language learning play an important role in heritage and non-heritage learners' interest in developing and maintaining a second/foreign language.

Parental Attitudes toward Foreign Language Learning

Attitudes are an integral part of language learning, as they are believed to influence behaviors. For example, Weinburgh (1998) explains that positive attitudes toward foreign language learning bring on behaviors that support and enhance such learning, such as selecting and reading books in the foreign language. Researchers such as Rokeach (1968) and Brown (1994) offer multiple definitions of the construct of attitude, which can be regarded in general as learned behavior formed early in childhood as a result of different stimuli and can have an evaluative preferential reaction (positive or negative). According to Rosenberg and Hovland (1960), attitudes consist of perceptions and beliefs, emotional reactions (positive or negative), and behavioral tendencies.

Research studies demonstrate that parental attitudes toward foreign language learning play a crucial role in learners' development of the language, even if it was not spoken at home. Hayman, Johnson & Mayers (1964) explain that parents' positive attitudes and support of their children's Spanish learning had a positive impact on their performance. Kim (1992) found that parental attitudes were

important contributing factors in shaping heritage students' positive attitudes toward learning Korean. Research by Gardner (1968) explicitly suggests a relationship between parental attitudes toward foreign language learning and the level of language proficiency achieved by students:

Relationships between the parents' attitudes and the students' orientations suggest that the students' orientation grows out of a family-wide orientation and consequently, the degree of skill which the student attains in a second language will be dependent upon the attitudinal atmosphere in the home (p. 144).

In addition, Oskamp and Schultz (2005) explain, "A child's attitudes are largely shaped by its own experiences with the world, but this is usually accomplished by explicit teaching and implicit modeling of parental attitudes" (p.126). Accordingly, it is clear that parents play an important role in shaping their children's attitudes and feelings about the world surrounding them, including how they approach foreign language learning.

Jones (2009) conducted a study at secondary schools and found that parental views on the importance of teaching foreign languages were mixed; only some believed it positively affects an overall learning experience in other subjects. Many parents felt incapable of helping their children study other languages. Parents in the study tended to encourage girls more than boys, and low-income parents appeared less concerned about their children learning foreign languages as compared with other parents.

In a survey of families of dual language enrichment students conducted by Parkers (2008), a majority indicated they chose dual language enrollment so that their children would be able to speak, read, and write in two languages, and the most frequent reasons stated by parents for this option were for their children to be successful in a global society and in school and to be comfortable relating to different people. Based on the findings of the study, it was

concluded that bilingual parents differ in their attitudes toward their children's language enrichment compared to monolingual parents.

Loewen, Ellis, and Hacker examined the relationship between an early start in language learning and students' motivation in 2006. Results showed that regarding motivation, statistically significant differences existed between those learners who had two years of prior language learning experience and those who had none. The findings further indicated that these students are more likely to perceive the views of their parents and other people as important.

A study undertaken by Sung and Padilla (1998) indicated that elementary school students were more motivated in learning a foreign language than secondary school students. Elementary students also perceived their parents as more involved in their language study than did high school students. Ethnic heritage was found to be a major contributory factor influencing students' learning of a foreign language. The findings further indicated that female students demonstrated significantly higher levels of motivation to learn another language than their male counterparts. Furthermore, elementary school parents demonstrated more positive attitudes toward foreign language learning and were more involved in their children's language study than were parents of high school students.

There are many ways in which parents' attitudes can influence their children's engagement in foreign language learning. Gardner (1985) classifies active parental influence as positive or negative. The positive role refers to parents' involvement and interest in their children's language learning. Young (1994a) delineates different situations where parents can positively impact their children's attitudes, such as "through discussion, by encouraging participation in foreign language, exchange programs and excursions, helping the child with homework, encouraging the child to read material written in the foreign language and by making the target language country the destination for a family holiday" (p. 85). Young (1994b) further argues that parents' positive attitudes toward foreign language learning can increase students' motivation and self-esteem when using the language.

The negative role, on the other hand, involves discouraging behaviors such as parents devaluing their children's efforts in learning a foreign language or favoring other subjects. In addition, showing no interest in or belittling the value and use of foreign languages can send children a negative message regarding the importance of other languages. Gardner (1985) further argues parents' attitudes toward the second language community can support/impede foreign language learning. Obviously, negative attitudes discourage learners from associating with the language spoken by those communities. Accordingly, it is of great importance to examine parents' attitudes toward language learning due to their direct impact on student's foreign language learning development.

Gaps in the Literature

In the area of learning Arabic as a foreign language, much of the empirical research has been carried out to examine students' rather than parents' attitudes. In his influential work, Belnap (1987) concluded that the majority of U.S. university learners of Arabic surveyed were interested in understanding Arabic literature and culture followed by a desire to travel/live in the Middle East. Job opportunities and heritage/cultural reasons were other motivations for study. A study conducted by Seymour-Jorn (2004) of the attitudes and motivations of Arab learners highlighted the importance of learning Arabic in preserving the cultural identity of respondents. Husseinali (2006) identified motivations for learning Arabic among undergraduates including interest in traveling and communicating with Arabic speakers, understanding the politics of the Middle East, increasing career opportunities, and preserving cultural identity speakers.

Research seems to be lacking in the area of the impact of parental attitudes on learning Arabic as a foreign language. Due to the importance of parental attitudes in foreign language learning and development, parental influence is especially important in the K-12 context, where children are often told by parents what classes to take.

An examination of the attitudes of parents of heritage and non-heritage Arabic learners is therefore deemed necessary.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to determine the attitudes of Arabic and non-Arabic speaking parents toward the importance of learning Arabic as a foreign language in the U.S. The study aims to compare the differences between perceptions of the two groups regarding the importance of this learning.

Research Questions

The following questions were formulated and examined through the use of appropriate statistical procedures: (1) What are the attitudes of Arabic- and non-Arabic-speaking parents toward learning Arabic as a foreign language in U.S. schools? and (2) What are the differences between perceptions of the two groups regarding the importance of learning Arabic in the United States?

Methods and Procedures

Participants

A total of 366 parents of learners of Arabic as a foreign language participated, including 238 Arabic-speaking parents (65%). The remaining 128 were non-Arabic speaking parents who were not of Arab origin (35%) and who spoke different languages, such as English, Urdu, Bengali, Italian, Kurdish, Spanish, and Creole, and mostly Muslim. Participants had children attending grades K-12 in various urban and suburban schools in Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, and Virginia that offer Arabic language classes as part of their mainstream academic programs. Views expressed in this survey are consequently not limited to a particular grade level but are inclusive of grades K-12.

The Survey Instrument

The survey instrument (Appendix A) was adapted from studies on parental attitudes regarding foreign language learning (Sung & Padilla, 1998) and attitudes of learners of Arabic as a foreign language (Husseinali, 2006; Wen, 1997). The first part of the survey consisted of five biographical questions. The remainder included 25 closed items, on which parents responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). In order to examine the reliability of the questionnaire items, Cronbach's Alpha formula was computed for the 25 items and was 0.94, which is strongly significant. The survey participants also had a chance to express their views through two open-ended items.

Data Collection Procedures

In 2012 the researchers contacted school administrations in Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, and Virginia for permission to pursue the study through the use of the survey plus a consent form to be distributed to participating parents in both Arabic and English. The researchers then sent 550 envelopes to schools, containing copies of the survey, consent form, and a cover letter explaining the purposes of the study. Arabic teachers distributed the envelopes to students in various grades to take home to their parents. Parents were asked to return completed questionnaires to the teachers within two weeks. The administrations mailed the researcher the completed surveys. Parents of 366 learners responded.

Data Analyses

Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used to analyze collected data. For simplification, the four optional responses of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree were combined into two nominal categories of agree and disagree. First, descriptive statistics using frequency counts was used to determine the percentages of parents agreeing and disagreeing with each of the 25 questionnaire items. Second, as part of the descriptive analysis, a cross tabulation of the data obtained from the parents of both Arabic and non-Arabic speakers was conducted in order to examine the

percentages of agreement/disagreement of both groups separately. Third, a chi-square test of comparison was used to determine if the two groups of parents responded significantly differently on any of the items in the questionnaire. Finally, a qualitative content analysis approach was used to analyze the two open-ended items..

Results

In order to examine parental attitudes toward learning Arabic as a foreign language in the U.S., the questionnaire aimed to determine parents' attitudes toward foreign language learning in general, their involvement in their children's learning of Arabic, their expectations regarding the importance of learning Arabic, and their rationales behind enrolling their children in Arabic classes.

Parents' Attitudes toward Learning a Foreign Language

Generally speaking, most parents demonstrated positive attitudes toward learning a foreign language in the U.S. Table 1 presents the percentages of parents agreeing and disagreeing with the value of learning other languages and the mode for their answers, which indicates the most frequent responses. The mode also indicates the strength with which participants agreed or disagreed with the items. The mode for items 1 through 8 ranges between 4 (*agree*) and 5 (*strongly agree*). Item 6 ("I wish I could speak another language perfectly") scored the highest, with 92% of the parents agreeing. Likewise, most parents believed that learning and speaking the language of a foreign country is important (over 84% for items 7 and 8). However, attitudes regarding the ability to read in another language were not as strong (64% agreement for item 1), which shows that parents were primarily interested in verbal communication, rather than literary competency.

Table 1: Parents' attitudes toward foreign language learning

Related Items	Agree	Disagree	Mode
1. Wish to read newspapers/magazines in another language	64.2	15.0	4
2. Wish to read literature in original language	71.6	11.3	4
3. Wish to learn foreign languages	77.3	6.3	4
4. Enjoy meeting speakers of other languages	74.1	6.8	4
5. Enjoy studying foreign language	82.7	6.3	4
6. Wish to speak another language perfectly	91.8	3.0	5
7. Believe everyone should learn a foreign language	84.4	4.3	5
8. Want to speak the language of a visited foreign country	84.5	4.9	4

Parents' Involvement in their Children's Arabic Language Learning

Parents' involvement in their children's foreign language learning is a strong indicator of their attitude toward that language. Table 2 shows the percentages of parents agreeing and disagreeing with the items that elicited their involvement in their children's Arabic study, along with the mode, indicating each item's most frequent response. Almost 93% of parents indicated that they encourage practicing Arabic as much as possible (item 9) and encourage continuing study of the language (item 10). In addition, over 91% of parents stated on item 16 that they urge getting help from the teacher if their children have problems with the language, which explains why more than 86% of parents were eager to help with homework (item 15). Approximately 86% of parents agreed that they were aware of the importance of learning Arabic in the U.S. (item 17) and thus nearly all of them indicated their positive involvement in their children's Arabic learning.

Table 2: Parents' involvement in their children's Arabic language study

Related Items	Agree	Disagree	Mode
9. Encourage frequent practicing of Arabic	92.7	2.4	5
10. Encourage continuing study of Arabic	92.9	2.8	5
11. Show interest in things related to Arabic	89.3	3.6	5
12. Encourage study of Arabic	90.2	4.1	5
13. Stress importance of Arabic after graduation	80.1	5.5	5

14. Want more time devoted to Arabic study	80.4	6.0	4
15. Help with Arabic homework	86.6	3.6	5
16. Encourage getting help from Arabic teacher	91.5	1.6	5
17. Am aware of importance of learning Arabic in U.S.	85.8	4.4	4

Parent's Expectations of Arabic Language Learning in the United States

Parents' expectations regarding their children studying a foreign language have a great impact on their attitudes. Research has shown that the expectations and values parents have regarding foreign language learning are strongly related to their children's academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001). Table 3 represents the percentages of parents agreeing and disagreeing with the items that elicited their expectations regarding the learning of Arabic as a foreign language. The most frequent response for each item is designated by the mode. Findings indicated that most parents valued the study of Arabic. They expected it to help their children communicate when traveling in Arabic-speaking countries (92%, item 24), meet and converse with more and varied people (91%, item 19), learn more about Arab cultures to understand the world better (91%, item 20), and better understand and respect Arab culture (91%, item 22). On one hand, only 68% of parents agreed that Arabic is one of the top-needed languages in the U.S. (item 25). On the other hand, 85% of parents believed that learning Arabic would make their children more competitive in the future job market (item 18).

Table 3: Parents' expectations regarding Arabic language study

Related Items	Agree	Disagree	Mode
18. Child will be more competitive in job market	85.0	3.8	5
19. Child will be able to converse with more people	91.0	2.7	5
20. Child will learn about Arab culture	90.8	2.5	5
21. Child will understand Middle East politics	71.0	7.9	4
22. Child will respect Arab culture	90.7	2.4	5
23. Child can study Arabic in college	82.2	4.4	5
24. Child can use Arabic in Arabic-speaking country	91.8	3.3	5
25. Arabic is critical in U.S.	68.9	13.4	5

Chi-Square Test Results

A chi-square test of comparison was conducted in order to examine the differences between perceptions of Arabic and non-Arabic speaking parents regarding the importance of learning Arabic in the U.S. As shown in Tables 4 through 6, in all related statements, the findings revealed a significant difference between perceptions of the two groups at the 0.05 level. These findings indicate that Arabic-speaking parents demonstrated significantly more positive attitudes than non-Arabic speaking parents regarding the importance of learning a foreign language. For example, items 1 (“I wish to read newspapers/magazines in another language”) and 2 (“I want to read literature in the original language, not in translation”) were used to

examine parents' attitudes toward foreign language learning. The results of the chi-square test indicated that Arabic-speaking parents have more positive attitudes toward the literacy aspect of foreign language learning than the non-Arabic speakers, who cared more about the verbal aspect.

Table 4: Comparisons of attitudes of Arabic- and non-Arabic-speaking parents

Related Items	Agree		Test Result
	Arabic-speaking	Non-Arabic speaking	
1. Wish to read newspapers/magazines in another language	74%	46%	.000
2. Want to read literature in the original language, not in translation	80%	56%	.000

It is also interesting that the second part of the survey, which elicits information regarding parents' involvement in their children's Arabic learning, shows via the results of the chi-square test that Arabic-speaking parents were significantly more involved than the non-Arabic-speaking parents. For example, 89% of Arabic-speaking parents believed that more time should be devoted to Arabic study compared to 64% of non-Arabic-speaking parents (item 14). Ninety-one percent of Arabic speakers stressed the importance of using Arabic after graduation compared to 60% of non-Arabic speakers (item 13). Ninety-eight percent of Arabic-speaking parents compared to 73% of non-Arabic-speaking parents showed considerable interest in things related to Arabic (item 11). Ninety-three percent of Arabic-speaking parents compared to 72% of their counterparts affirmed that they were aware of the importance of learning Arabic in the U.S. (item 17). The apparent and significant involvement the Arabic-speaking parents reported in the survey toward their children's Arabic learning could be due to their knowledge of the language. Future

research should look more deeply into the reasons behind parents' involvement or lack thereof in their children's Arabic language learning.

Table 5: Comparisons of involvement of Arabic- and non-Arabic-speaking parents

Related Items	Agree		Test Result
	Arabic-speaking	Non-Arabic speaking	
9. Encourage practicing Arabic language as much as possible	99%	81%	.000
10. Encourage continuing study of Arabic language	99%	82%	.000
11. Show considerable interest in things related to Arabic language	98%	73%	.000
12. Really encourage study of Arabic language	99%	74%	.000
13. Stress the importance of using Arabic language after graduation	91%	60%	.000
14. Think more time should be devoted to Arabic language study	89%	64%	.000
15. Try to help with Arabic language homework	95%	72%	.000

16. Am aware of the importance of learning Arabic in the United States	93%	72%	.000
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The third part of the survey intended to examine parents' expectations regarding their children's study of Arabic in the U.S. Ninety percent of Arabic-speaking parents attributed their positive attitudes of their children learning Arabic to the hope that their children would be better prepared to study Arabic in college, compared to only 67% of non-Arabic speaking parents (item 23), which shows that the latter were not as eager for their children to engage in post-secondary Arabic study. Understanding and respecting Arab culture were also important expectations for parents, as 96% of Arabic-speaking parents compared to 81% of non-Arabic-speaking parents believed that learning Arabic would allow their children to understand the world better through understanding Arab cultures, and 95% of Arabic-speaking parents expected their children to gain a better respect of Arab culture through study of the language, compared with 83% of non-Arabic speaking parents. In addition, using the language when traveling to an Arabic-speaking country (item 24) scored higher for Arabic-speaking parents (98%) compared to their counterparts (80%), indicating that it is important to Arabic-speaking parents that their children speak the language when they visit their home or other Arabic-speaking countries.

Table 6: Comparisons of expectations of Arabic- and non-Arabic speaking parents

Related Items	Agree		Test Result
	Arabic-speaking	Non-Arabic speaking	
20. My child will learn more about Arab cultures to understand the world better	96%	81%	.000
21. My child will better understand the Middle East Politics	76%	61%	.033
22. My child will better understand and respect the Arab culture	95%	83%	.000
23. My child will be better prepared to study Arabic in college	90%	67%	.000
24. My child will use the language if he/she travels to an Arabic-speaking country	98%	80%	.000

Open-Ended Questions

In addition to the quantitative results reported above, a qualitative content analysis was made possible through parents' responses regarding two open-ended items: (1) How important is it to have your child maintain his or her home language? and (2) In the United States, how important is it for your child to understand and use Arabic fluently? Codes such as reading, speaking, job opportunities, and culture were derived from the open items in the

survey, while other codes such as religious and linguistic identities were drawn from previous literature on the attitudes of students regarding Arabic language learning (Husseinali, 2006). Following are the themes that emerged from examination of the open-ended items.

Question 1: How important is it that your child maintains his or her home language?

Responses of Arabic-Speaking Parents

The Arabic-speaking parents indicated three major reasons for the importance of their children maintaining Arabic. They believed that it is important for their children to learn Arabic in order to maintain communication and affinity with family in their native country; to preserve their culture, religion and traditions; and to maintain their identity as Arabs in the U.S.

1. Maintaining communication and affinity with family

Most Arabic-speaking parents believed that maintaining communication and affinity with family in their home country is one of the main reasons why their children should be learning and maintaining Arabic in the U.S. One parent explained, "It is important because it enables my child to communicate with his family in our country of origin and enables him to communicate with a lot of non-English speakers." Another parent added, "It is important so that my child will be able to speak with our relatives and people who are Arabic speakers and understand what they're saying and communicate with them fluently". Speaking Arabic also gave their children respect and pride among their Arabic-speaking relatives; as one of the parents indicated, "It is very important that my child maintains the Arabic language because it is his native language and when he returns to his country, he has to speak Arabic fluently in order for people to respect him." The idea of gaining respect as a result of speaking Arabic in one's homeland was reinforced by other parents who reflected, "I feel people from my original country will have more respect for my child if he/she knows Arabic."

2. Preserving the culture, religion, and traditions

In addition, Arabic-speaking parents believed that learning Arabic helps preserve their cultural background, religion, and traditions. One parent explained that, “Arabic language helps my child a lot in knowing his origins and culture, regardless of where he is and how many languages he knows. It also helps him in knowing and learning about his religion.” Being able to read in Arabic was also reiterated by most of the Arabic-speaking parents as a significantly important skill: “Since it’s the language of the Holy Qur’an, it’s very important to my children to know this language in order to be able to read and understand the Qur’an.” Another parent indicated that learning Arabic is “very important, but mostly from a religious standpoint, in order to be able to read the Qur’an and understand its meaning.”

3. Maintaining an Arab identity in the United States

Being identified as Arab emerged as an important theme. One parent commented that “the importance in keeping the Arabic language is to maintain the Arabic identity and our native culture as Arab Americans.” Arabic-speaking parents did not want their children be identified as just Americans, but rather as “Arab Americans.” One way to achieve this goal is by maintaining the usage of Arabic at home and encouraging their children to take Arabic classes at school. As one parent rationalized, “The language is the main link that keeps my child attached to his roots and the Arab community surrounding him.”

Most Arabic-speaking parents also referred to the importance of language in shaping their children’s identity. They expressed that maintaining the native language “makes you who you are” and helps their children “not to lose their roots.”

Responses of Non-Arabic Speaking Parents

Regarding the importance of their children learning Arabic, non-Arabic speaking parents expressed reasons such as understanding Arab cultures. Some non-Arabic speaking parents

indicated that by using Arabic, their children would be honoring the Arab culture in their communities. As one parent said, "Since Arabs offer a variety of different services such as grocery stores, gas stations, and hair salons in different communities, Arabic is considered to play a significant role in American culture and by speaking the language we can honor their heritage." Non-Arabic speaking parents shared similar beliefs with their counterparts in terms of emphasizing the importance of Arabic in helping their children read the Qur'an. As one parent explained, "I want my children to learn Arabic so they can read and understand the Qur'an without its English translation."

Question 2. How important is it for your child to understand Arabic fluently?

Responses of Arabic-Speaking Parents

Not only has Arabic been of increasing interest in the U.S. following 2001 (Morrison, 2003), but as indicated by Taha (2007), it was dubbed one of the critically needed languages in the U.S. by the Bush administration in 2006. Therefore, it is important to examine parents' attitudes regarding the significance of learning and using Arabic in the U.S. Arabic-speaking parents indicated that this is of great importance through their responses to Question 2. They gave several motivations for having their children learn Arabic alongside certain critical initiatives related to moral, cultural, religious, and professional values.

Moral values. Arabic-speaking parents expressed desire for their children to learn moral values through Arabic. Moral values can be divided into two aspects: an obligation toward maintaining communication with those who speak Arabic only and a desire to raise awareness and address misconceptions about Arabs. As one parent explained, "It is important for my child to understand and use Arabic in the U.S. in order to help others who do not speak English." Another parent added that knowing Arabic will also help their children translate for those who cannot speak English. As one parent illustrated, "In the United States being bilingual is important because

many Arabs don't understand the English language, so knowing two languages could help other people and the person can be able to translate." Arabic-speaking parents also felt a moral obligation toward their children in equipping them with the appropriate linguistic tools that would help them address misconceptions and stereotypes regarding Arabs in the future. One parent echoed concerns regarding "a misunderstanding of the Arabic and Islamic culture and [that] knowing the Arabic language will help my child know and listen to more than one side and help Americans understand related issues." Another parent referred to the importance of learning Arabic after September 11:

It gives the opportunity to broaden my child's horizon and understand other people, especially after the interest of the American government to study the Arabic language as a result of the September 11 events.

It is thus evident that many Arabic-speaking parents perceived Arabic learning in the U.S. as a tool that helps non-English speakers and that fights stereotypes.

Cultural and religious values. Arabic-speaking parents often stressed the importance of maintaining a cultural and religious identity. Being able to use and understand Arabic in the U.S. is regarded as a prerequisite for preserving their children's culture and religion. An Arabic-speaking parent revealed that:

It is very important that my child uses Arabic language in the United States because he has to know that he is from Arabic origins, which help a lot in raising the children according to the Arabic culture and traditions and not the American ones. Moreover, this will help him read the holy book.

Another parent shared similar beliefs that "Arabic language will help Arab children understand the culture and traditions of their home countries, where they might end up living in the future." Learning Arabic also allows the children to become members of a

growing Arabic community. One parent shed light on the importance of Arabic in the U.S. by illustrating that “it is very important that my child speaks, reads, and writes in Arabic because we live in a state that has a large Arab community and knowing Arabic makes it easier to communicate with this community.” Accordingly, learning Arabic in the U.S. will not only benefit heritage speakers but the community at large, as one parent asserted that “Arabic population has increased and using and maintaining Arabic language will improve communication and keep the Arabic community coherent and united.”

Professional values: Many of the Arabic-speaking parents referred to the advantage of knowing Arabic from a professional perspective. Speaking both Arabic and English enhances the likelihood of finding more job opportunities. As one parent explained, “Learning Arabic language can become of great use in cities where heavily populated Arab citizens are living.” Another parent added that “with current political situations, fluent knowledge of Arabic can offer a great job opportunity.” One other parent indicated that “we live in an area where there are many Arab Americans. Some do not speak English, whereas those who speak both languages are needed in all work places.” Accordingly, having more opportunities in the job market was an incentive for parents to encourage their children to learn Arabic.

Responses of Non-Arabic Speaking Parents

Fewer non-Arabic-speaking parents thought it important for their children to use and understand Arabic in the U.S. Their rationale was mainly based on religious and professional concerns. For example, they emphasized the importance of Arabic in helping their children read the Qur’an. As one parent explained, “I want my children to learn Arabic so they can read and understand the Qur’an without its English translation.” In addition, several parents referred to the importance of Arabic in helping with their children’s future career aspirations. One, for example, believed that “Arabic is a language that is highly valued in the job market now and will continue to be in the future.” However, the majority of non-Arabic-

speaking parents did not regard the use of Arabic as critical in the U.S. context. One parent explained, "I think it is important to use Arabic language, but not that important because not much Arabic speaking is being used in the United States." Some parents even believed that knowing Arabic would not make a difference when their children applied for jobs. "I don't think it is very important to learn Arabic fluently because my child would not need to know how to speak Arabic during a business interview." Other parents voiced their concerns by indicating that since Arabic is less commonly taught in schools, it would seem to hold no importance in the job market. Clearly, Arabic- and non-Arabic speaking parents varied significantly in their attitudes regarding the importance of using and understanding Arabic in the U.S.

Discussion and Conclusions

The qualitative data greatly complement and support the quantitative results. The results of the closed-ended items show that Arabic- and non-Arabic speaking parents had positive attitudes toward learning Arabic in the U.S. However, a chi-square test showed that the two groups differed significantly in their opinions regarding their involvement in and expectations of their children's Arabic study. Arabic-speaking parents were significantly more motivated for their children to learn Arabic as it would help them communicate when visiting an Arabic-speaking country, understand and respect Arab culture, and better prepare them for collegiate Arabic study. Accordingly, they were significantly more aware of the importance of learning Arabic in the U.S. and, thus, devoted more time to helping their children with Arabic and placed more emphasis on the importance of reading in Arabic. These quantitative results were corroborated by the open-ended questions, which allowed parents to express their views regarding the importance of maintaining their native language and using Arabic in the U.S.

The qualitative results suggest that there is a strong interest and commitment among Arabic-speaking parents regarding learning Arabic in U.S. schools. Arabic-speaking parents emphasized the importance of learning Arabic due to its cultural, religious, and

professional impact on their children. Knowing Arabic allows their children to communicate with extended family overseas and the growing Arab and Muslim communities in the U.S., read the Qur'an, and access greater and diversified job opportunities both in the U.S. and Middle East. In his seminal survey study of the perception of Arabic-speaking parents regarding bilingual education and Arab ethnicity, Youssef (1985) concluded that the positive responses of parents indicated "they view their language and culture as an asset to both themselves and their children" (p. 196). The results of the current study build upon this previous research by highlighting the multiple perspectives of Arabic-speaking parents regarding the importance of Arabic. Arabic-speaking parents encourage study of the language as they view it as a tool to help their children not only preserve their cultural background, but also maintain their religious identity, conform to the larger Arabic society, and prepare them for the national and international job market.

On the other hand, most of the non-Arabic-speaking parents did not see substantial benefits from learning Arabic in the U.S. aside from allowing their children to read the Qur'an without translation and broadening their children's horizons regarding other cultures and traditions, which explains why only 60% of non-Arabic speaking parents encouraged their children to study and use Arabic after graduation.

Parental attitudes toward foreign language learning have a great impact on their children's learning process. The present study revealed that there is a discrepancy between the attitudes and expectations of Arabic and non-Arabic speaking parents regarding learning Arabic as a foreign language. Future research should focus more on the attitudes of non-Arabic speaking parents and include parents from different ethnic backgrounds in order to explore their perceptions regarding Arabic study in the U.S. There needs to be more direct advocacy on the moral and professional values and reasons for learning language beyond cultural and religious enrichment. If few parents recognize the cognitive and intellectual benefits of language study in general, and if parents do not realize the

job opportunities that can accompany critical language study, then something needs to be done.

Appendix A

Background Information

Please mark/provide the answer that describes you best:

Where do you live?

Urban Area

Suburban Area

Do you speak another language(s) in addition to English?

Yes (Please Specify)

No

What language do you consider to be your first/native language?

.....

What language do you speak at home?

.....

Does your child take Arabic Classes at school?

Yes (Please Specify Grade Level)

No

Survey Instrument

Please complete all three (3) pages of the following questionnaire. Circle the number that best describes your opinion: It is important to study foreign languages because:

1) I wish to read newspapers/magazines in another language.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

2) I want to read literature in the original language, not in translation.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

3) I wish to learn many foreign languages.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

4) I enjoy meeting and listening to speakers of other languages.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5
5) Studying a foreign language is an enjoyable experience.				
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5
6) I wish I could speak another language perfectly.				
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5
7) It is important for everyone to learn a foreign language.				
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5
8) I want to speak the language if I visit a foreign country.				
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

As a parent of a child who is learning Arabic, I:

9) Encourage practicing Arabic language as much as possible.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

10) Encourage continuing study of Arabic language.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

11) Show considerable interest in things related to Arabic language.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

12) Really encourage study of Arabic language.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

13) Stress the importance of using Arabic language after graduation.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

14) Think more time should be devoted to Arabic language study.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

15) Try to help with Arabic language homework.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

16) Urge getting help from the teacher if having problems with the language class.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

17) Am aware of the importance of learning Arabic in the United States.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

It is important for my child to study Arabic because:

18) My child can be more competitive in the future job market.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

19) My child will be able to meet and converse with more and varied people.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

20) My child will learn more about Arab cultures to understand the world better.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

21) My child will better understand Middle East politics.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

22) My child will better understand and respect Arab culture.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

23) My child will be better prepared to study Arabic in college.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

24) My child will use the language if he/she travels to an Arabic-speaking country.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

25) Arabic is one of the critical and top needed languages in the United States.

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

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