

# **The Arabic Language Fog of War: Exploring Iraq War Veterans' Motivations to Study Arabic Language and Culture Post-Deployment**

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## **Abstract**

This article describes research into Iraq War Veterans studying Arabic at the college level post-deployment. What is it about their exposure to the language and culture that motivates them to study the language after serving in Iraq? Few research studies exist in the area of Veterans' education, a federally recognized minority. The study's purpose was to explore Iraq war veterans' language learning motivations and described their experiences, through the use of qualitative research methodology and the development of case study narratives. Results indicate that understanding the Veteran experience can foster a diversity-friendly, inclusive environment in the critical language classroom. There are broader implications for veteran higher education, other Less Commonly Taught Languages, alternative pedagogies, non-traditional student education, K-12, foreign language education policy, foreign relations, diversity & equity in the classroom, and national security.

## **Introduction**

After September 11, 2001 and the inception of the Iraqi War in 2003, interest in the study of the Arabic language and culture in colleges and universities has dramatically increased across the United States, as is evidenced by expanding enrollment figures and the greater number of classes offered in Arabic language, literature, and culture. Arabic is no longer considered a Less Commonly Taught Language (LCTL) according to the Modern Language Association (MLA, 2006). Since 2003, the Department of Veteran Affairs has estimated that over two million military personnel have cycled through Iraq, their deployments ranging from 6 months to two years or more, and they have all been exposed in varying degrees to the Arabic language and

culture. The total length of exposure exceeds that of a majority of language study abroad programs.

To clarify, a veteran is defined as any person who has served in the military. Veterans are given the title of Iraq War veteran if they have served in any branch of the United States armed forces at any time during United States military engagement in Iraq and have actively participated in military operations involving Iraq. There are several locations where U.S. military personnel may be stationed, including Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, the Persian Gulf, Yemen, Tajikistan, Japan, and Israel in order to earn the title Iraq War Veteran. This study focused on participants who spent time in a country where Arabic is one of the official languages.

By 2005, I noticed a striking trend in the composition of my Arabic language and culture classrooms. Each academic term, anywhere from two to four post-deployment Iraq War veterans enrolled in my Arabic language and culture classes. My colleagues reported similar numbers in their classrooms as well. This trend provided the impetus for me to conduct further research into the teaching of post-deployment veterans. Very little research has been conducted by language professionals into veterans' motivations to take classes in Arabic post-deployment. For the veteran participants in this study, Arabic is a language to which they have already been exposed, but they may not need in achieving long-range educational goals. To say they are merely curious as a result of their language exposure in the Middle East is a very broad conclusion that does not incorporate the depth and character of the intercultural interactions these veterans had. Many of their intercultural interactions occurred in a context of conflict and many of these were negative in nature. In this way, as a population of students within the language classroom, the nature of their intercultural interactions sets them apart from other groups of students such as heritage language learners and traditional students.<sup>8</sup> The current lack of research focusing on veteran student populations in the Arabic language classroom presents a gap in academic pedagogical literature. Investigating what motivates veterans to study

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<sup>8</sup> Here, the term traditional students refers to those students between the ages of 18-22 who are enrolled full time in a college -level program and who achieve their academic/educational goals in the 4-year institutional model.

the language and culture of a region to which they were formerly deployed and to which they may not return could uncover information helpful to educators who design and implement language programs, university administrators who develop policy, and perhaps to the military personnel who train and prepare soldiers in the language and culture of the country of deployment. Existing educational research can benefit from learning about this significant population of minority students attending colleges and universities.

### **Learning Arabic: How hard is it really?**

Arabic is classified as one of the hardest languages for English speakers to learn (Al-Batal, 1995). Arabic is a “category four” language (Samimy, 1992), which refers to the time investment needed to learn the language. Generally, it can take an individual four times as long to learn Arabic as it can to learn a category one language such as Spanish. The length of time it takes to learn Arabic can discourage students from learning the language. One reason Arabic is categorized in this way is the diglossic nature of the language (Versteegh, 1997). Diglossia refers to the linguistic situation where an Arabic dialect is used at home and informal settings and a formal version of the language, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is used for news broadcasts, literature, lectures, and for communication between dialect regions. There exists a spectrum of Arabic language usage between the colloquial dialects and MSA (Alosh 1997). MSA is most frequently taught in institutions of higher education. For students, it can seem as if they must learn two languages in order to grasp the intricacies of communication (Belnap, 1987). Arabic teachers need to understand students’ motivations in order to maintain their interest and to battle discouragement they may feel after several courses or months of diligent study with no noticeable improvement in proficiency (Al-Batal, 1995).

### **Research Question**

The main research question going into the study was the following: 1) What motivates these Iraq war veterans to learn Arabic language and culture? Two sub-questions emerged as the data were collected: a) Does their previous exposure to Arabic language and

culture contribute to their motivations to learn the language; and b) Why do these Iraq war veterans want to learn the Arabic language and culture after their deployments? As previously stated, this is part of a larger study conducted over a period of years, but this article focuses only on the language motivation aspect.

### ***Language Learning Motivation***

Within the realm of social psychology, the term “motivation” refers to a psychological process that leads an individual to achieve a specific goal. It is among the various affective variables that influence learning achievement (Gardner, 1985). Foreign-language educators require an understanding of student motivations, because tapping into these motivations, especially in less-commonly taught languages, helps to increase course enrollment and allows educators to develop curricula that raise student levels of proficiency. Because of the synergy between motivation and the other affective variables like orientation (Husseinali, 2004 & 2006) and language anxiety (Samimy & Tabuse, 1992) that influence learning, it is nearly impossible to discuss motivation without considering factors such as risk-taking tendencies, language aptitude, and career aims (Dornyei, 2003 & Samimy, 1994). All of these impact the achievement of language-learning goals, both negatively and positively.

One socio-educational model posits that language-learning motivation comes from four main areas – context, anxiety, external influences, and individual differences (such as aptitude and previous language learning) (Gardner, 2001). There is an abundance of studies regarding language-learning motivation, dating back forty years (Dornyei, 2003). The majority of language motivation studies for the past forty years have been conducted on the more commonly taught languages of English, Spanish, French, and German (Taha, 2007). These studies have had far-reaching implications for foreign and second language pedagogy (Ushioda, 2003). As suggested in the introduction, applying some of these research theories and pedagogy to Arabic language learning is more than timely. As of a 2008 MLA study, Arabic was the 8th most studied language in the United States. Increased student enrollment has resulted in an increased demand for Arabic classes, but it is vital to study the motivations in students of

Arabic within their actual pedagogical context rather than merely making general, broad assumptions regarding the growth of interest in learning the Arabic language (Husseinali, 2006).

Absent in many of the existing language motivation studies are qualitative detailed descriptions and accounts of students' exposure to language and culture prior to their classroom experience. A study done by Lambert (2001) posits that factors exist that contribute to language learning motivation prior to the student even entering the classroom. Students' past encounters with the language and culture become operative affective variables within the classroom context.

To date, the majority of research participants in Arabic language studies have been put in generic categories such as "Arabic language students" and no other data regarding the participants, as individuals outside the classroom, have been provided. One study conducted by Husseinali (2004 and 2006) divided students into heritage and non-heritage language learners, but there is no data from those studies that investigated and qualitatively documented the students' actual experiences with the language prior to their classroom experiences. Because participants' identities outside the classroom contribute to the context that they bring to the classroom environment (Alosh, 1997), it is of value to explore foreign language students' motivations within the context of their prior intercultural experiences, as well as prior language learning experiences. Because cultural learning is such an organic part of language learning, I refer to Arabic language learning as Arabic language and culture learning.

Several theories informed this qualitative research study, including Dornyei's construct for language learning motivation (1994 and 1996), Gardner and Lambert's language learning motivation theories (1972), and Norton's (2000) postulation on language learning and cultural identity. These theories operate within veterans' intercultural experiences and their motivations to learn Arabic language and culture and were used to build an operational construct for the relationship between language learning motivations, other affective variables in language learning, and previous ALC exposure.

### *A Construct for Language Learning Motivation*

According to studies conducted by Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1994), measuring competence and language learning behavior integrates three main components: integrative motivation, linguistic self-confidence, and appraisal of the classroom environment (Dornyei, 1996). Integrative motivation refers to the sociocultural dimension of language learning. It is discussed in detail below, but can generally be described as the language learners' attitudes toward the speakers and culture of the target language. Linguistic self-confidence combines a variety of affective variables, the main components being language anxiety and language learners' self-esteem within the target language environment (Dornyei, 2003). Appraisal refers to the learners' attitudes about and perceptions of the language classroom, the language teacher, and classroom materials.

The Dornyei, Clement, and Noels (1994) research found that the classroom environment contributes to motivation in unique but measurable ways. They identified several aspects of the classroom environment affecting student motivation. Table 1 identifies and describes these elements of the classroom environment.

Factor	Description
Group Cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapport amongst students</li> <li>• Communities of practice (Lave &amp; Wenger, 1991) inside and outside the classroom</li> </ul>
Instructor Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' perceptions of teachers' L2 knowledge</li> <li>• Native vs. non-native teacher speakers (Braine, 1999)</li> </ul>
Course Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevance of course materials</li> <li>• Students' perception of course materials' significance to their language-learning goals</li> </ul>

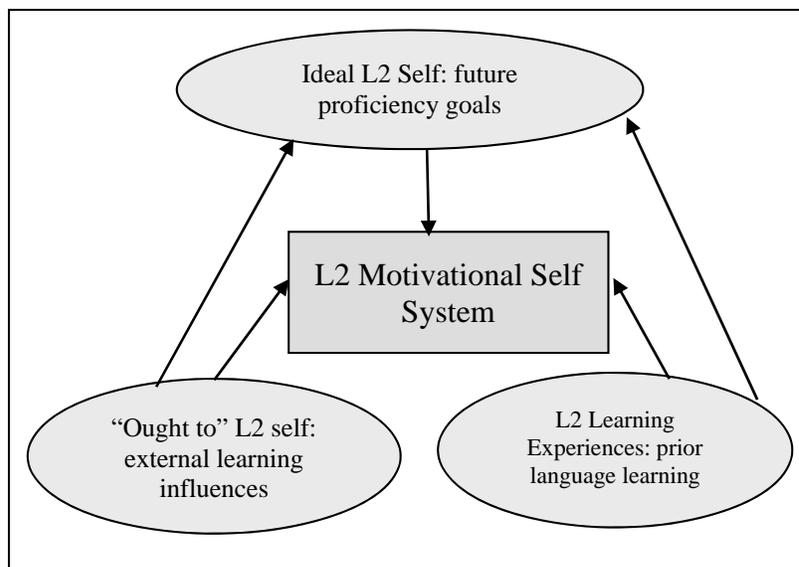
**Table 1: Factors of student appraisal in the classroom environment summarized from Clement, Dornyei, Noels (1994)**

The Dornyei et al. study found that even though instrumental motivation (i.e. driven by specific language achievement goals beyond the language classroom; explained further below) seemed to be operative within the participants, integrative motivation (i.e. driven by an internal desire to understand the language and culture without specific language achievement goals) seemed to be the most prominent variable motivating the students to learn. In a subsequent study, Dornyei (1996) reflected that it is possible that integrative motivation may be more prominent among students when there are short-term or situational goals within the language classroom environment, which would explain the lack of instrumental motivation contributing to the classroom context at any given time. However, Dornyei conceded that this is by no means a complete picture of the classroom environment, and other variables may be present, immeasurable within this particular study:

“It has been pointed out several times in the second language literature that the difficulty of understanding the exact nature of classroom events lies to a large extent in the complexity of the classroom. In our attempt to find a scientific construct that would cover a large number of classroom phenomena, we applied a group dynamics-based approach.” (pg. 75)

As with Dornyei’s 1996 study, my research applied a group-dynamics-based approach when exploring motivation that the participant veterans brought to the classroom environment. Veterans’ motivations to learn Arabic language and culture post-deployment showed all the characteristics of the complex, recursive process that Dornyei (2005) re-conceptualized into the “L2 motivational self system.” This model attempts to account for motivational factors external to the classroom experience. In recognizing that motivation is a complex, recursive psychological process (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991), this model explains language-learning motivation at the level of the individual language learner. Understanding the L2 motivational self helps in accounting for the context that the individual brings to the classroom and what they contribute to the classroom environment.

Figure 1 conceptualizes this model of language learning motivation according to Dornyei (2005).



**Fig. 1**

The three dimensions of the L2 Motivational Self System, as explained by Dornyei (2005) and represented in Figure 1, include the following:

- The ideal L2 self refers to the language learning and proficiency goals of the individual learner. These goals may be integrative or instrumental in nature.
- The L2 “ought to” self refers to the smaller incremental achievement goals of the language learner. The “ought to” self includes completing homework assignments and classroom activities and meeting course requirements. For example, an individual language learner knows he or she “ought to” study vocabulary lists prior to taking a quiz or test to maintain a satisfactory grade in the course. These smaller, incremental achievement goals are instrumental, not integrative, and are generally imposed upon the learner from an outside authority. The “ought to” self is more concerned with completion of the linguistic task than understanding the L2/ target language and culture.

- The final dimension incorporates the language learner's prior experiences and exposure to the language and culture before he or she decides to learn the language in the classroom. It may also include concurrent exposure to the language and culture while the student is taking coursework (Dornyei uses heritage language learners in his example).

Dornyei's conceptualizations set a solid framework for my research because his three dimensions of the L2 motivational self-system help to describe Iraq war veterans' language learning motivation. However, there is an additional aspect to the veterans' language learning, what I've termed illumination, which seems to fall outside of this construct and will be discussed in the results section.

## **Methodology**

I base the information herein on a qualitative/interpretative study I conducted from 2006 through 2010 with Iraq war veteran student participants. I eventually focused on a population of nineteen Iraq war veterans studying Arabic language and culture and Middle East Studies at a large land-grant university, at a community college with a coordinated transfer program to the land-grant university, and at two other Midwest universities. Using a narrative methodology drawn from multiple data sources (Glesne, 2006; Richards, 2001; Norton, 2000), I explored, in-depth, the nature of the veteran students' prior cultural and educational experiences. I then related these experiences to their motivations and to other affective variables, which became part of their learning of Arabic language and culture. The qualitative approach included an open-ended questionnaire in conjunction with individual interviews, focus group interviews, classroom observations when possible, and field notes (Nichols, 2010). The use of multiple data-gathering techniques produced rich and thought-provoking results.

Multiple interviews were conducted with each of the 19 participants, with a maximum of three for each veteran (Siedman, 2006). These interviews generally lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. During the interviews, the veterans were asked open-ended

questions and allowed to respond in as much or as little time as they needed, as recommended by Glesne (2006).

“Interviewing is an occasion for close research-participant interaction. Qualitative research provides many opportunities to engage feelings because it is a distance-reducing experience.” (p. 105)

Nine of the 19 participants also participated in a focus-group interview. Each focus group consisted of three participants who had served in Iraq together. As predicted by Richards (2009), group discussion enhanced the veterans’ narrative detail, clarified their perspectives on being exposed to the language and culture, and helped in the triangulation of data (Richards, 2009). By triangulating the data in this way, I was able to identify any inconsistencies in the veterans’ reports on their language learning and eliminate any questionable data that I had obtained. It also helped to identify perspective changes in the veterans over time.

I observed each of the participants at least once in the classroom setting. Observing their intercultural interactions while they were stationed in Iraq was not possible, so it was necessary to find an alternative (Duda and Allison, 1989). Participant observation becomes a vital part of analyzing the data, because it helps the researcher “to understand the research setting, its participants, and their behavior.” (Glesne, 2006, p. 51). Indeed the observation and the accompanying field notes (as per Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995) helped me to gain an understanding of the variety of perspectives that emerged in the data analysis process (as per Spradley, 1979 and 1980).

Finally, after transcribing each of the interviews and focus group interviews, I used the transcriptions and classroom observation notes to develop a case narrative for each veteran (example in Appendix A). These case narratives aided in the analysis of data (Webster and Mertova, 2007), provided specific examples of trends in language learning, perspective changes, attitudes and language learning behaviors (Samimy, 1999), identified individuals’ similarities and differences (Wolcott, 2001), and helped in telling the veterans’ stories, vital to the qualitative research experience (Norton, 2000 and Norton and Toohey, 2004). Once the case narratives were developed, each participant was given a copy in order to review the information and have input on how the information was represented (Weiss, 1994). This was important as some veterans were still completing their

military service and they did not want identifying information available to the public. It also helped them to have a voice in the research (Pennycook, 2001) as well as helped me to completely understand their experiences (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) within the context of their language learning (Norton and Toohey, 2004).

### **Analysis and Results**

Fifteen of the nineteen participants in my 2010 study believed they would be using their knowledge of Arabic language and culture in the future. Some had goals to become proficient enough to communicate with sufficient expertise for a career that required speaking and/or translating, while others wanted to gain enough expertise for reading Arabic publications or building relationships with specific native Arabic speakers. Learning for these reasons—eventual achievement of financial success or status as an expert—indicates instrumental motivation in operation.

Instrumental motivation may also include the notion of “investment” (Norton, 2000), which indicates changed perceptions about the target language. Though most had very little knowledge of or feeling about Arabic language and culture prior to deployment, all nineteen veterans expressed that they now felt Arabic was an “important language” for them to know in the future, including those with no career plans involving Arabic language and culture. However, only five of the participants exhibited purely instrumental reasons for studying Arabic.

Three of the nineteen participants indicated purely integrative reasons for studying Arabic language and culture. They stated that they were there for love of the language and interest in the culture. A majority of participants gave no specifically stated career goals or social purposes when asked why they continued to take Arabic classes. Their motivations for continuing Arabic language and culture studies were much less specific. Their reasons included combinations of the following: “...may work with the language in the future;” “it is interesting and it is important to learn;” “may teach in the future;” “may go back to Iraq;” want to know the basics for possible future use;” “required for major and fun to speak;” “won’t rely on translators and can communicate directly with locals.” These respondents seemed

to have a combination of both integrative and instrumental motivations (Nichols, 2010). Most of the participants had reflected deeply on their interactions in Iraq and expressed desires to understand more about the culture and how the language reflected the culture. They recognized that they were changed by their intercultural experiences and interactions, and were using Arabic language and culture classes to understand those changes. Table 2 provides a brief summary of the veteran participants' language learning motivations, the classification of their motivation in the existing literature, and language learning motivators.

Participant	Type of Motivation According to Dornyei (2003)	Answer to the interview question, "Did your experiences in Iraq motivate you to learn Arabic in college?"	Answer to the questionnaire question, "Why are you taking Arabic now?"
Alissa	Integrative	Yes	Just interested in it for now; may want to teach it in the future
Anthony	Integrative	Yes	Want to work with the language in the future
Bob	Instrumental	Yes	Required for the major to minor in Arabic
Brandon	Instrumental/Integrative	Yes	Most likely will have to know it for a career in the military
Brent	Instrumental/Integrative	Yes	Will probably go back to the region someday and want to know what they're saying and communicate with locals
Cameron	Instrumental/Integrative	Yes	Career in Intelligence; interesting language
Conner	Instrumental/Integrative	Yes	Important language to learn; career in Intelligence
Derek	Instrumental	Yes	Just want to know the basics
Jacob	Instrumental/Integrative	Yes	Know the alphabet; Like languages; Wanted to learn it, but was too hard
Joseph	Instrumental/Integrative	Yes	Important language; career in intelligence

Lawrence	Instrumental	Yes	New kind of war requires that you speak their language; will probably go back to Iraq
Malcom	Instrumental	Yes	Helps with the career path
Michael	Instrumental	Yes	Required for the major
Nicholas	Instrumental/Integrative	Yes	Important and interesting language; required for the major
Quinn	Integrative	Yes	Love it; fun to learn
Richard	Instrumental/Integrative	Yes	Fun to know and speak with people; required for the major
Sam	Instrumental/Integrative	Yes	Liked using it with the locals and probably go back to Iraq
Travis	Instrumental/Integrative	Yes	Not as hard as I thought; enjoy it; will probably go back to Iraq and it will be useful to know; won't rely on translators
Zach	Instrumental/Integrative	Yes	May want a career in intelligence but it's a language that's good to know anyway

**Table 2: Major Language Learning Motivators**

It became obvious in studying the data that their motivations could not be limited to two categories, because motivations for learning Arabic language and culture were also affected by influences prior to and outside the classroom and by psychological factors that cannot be measured here (but can be described via the veterans' narratives). Factors such as prior language education, travel history, and personal value systems (which included some political and religious beliefs) entered into students' decisions to study Arabic language and culture. Fourteen of the nineteen were exposed to foreign languages before deployment and therefore had previous successes (and failures) with language learning.

One participant believed a trip to Europe with her grandfather when she was in her teens started her interest in other languages and cultures. Several students believed strongly that knowing the Arabic language and culture was important to the strengthening of America's position in the Middle East. One student explained, "It's a new kind of war that requires that you speak their language..." These beliefs are all "influential" motivational variables. The notion of "influential" motivation, which takes into account the learner's life-long influences and previous experiences, is more important than many educators realize (Norton, 2000).

One participant strongly exemplifying influential motivation in her interview was a young woman, Alissa (pseudonym), whose first exposure to the Arabic language was during college, when she became acquainted with students from the Arabian Gulf area. She learned some basic words and phrases from her friends and then went on to take a course in linguistic anthropology. After joining the Reserves, she was sent to Iraq, where she functioned as a supply specialist. In that position, she said she learned a lot from her interactions with Iraqi refugee families who lived in her camp. She felt frustrated when she could not communicate adequately, and became especially concerned about an Iraqi woman who was living in the camp to escape an abusive husband. The woman became a recluse, and Alissa wanted badly to reach out to her and talk with her, woman to woman, but the language barrier prevented it. She also became frustrated when trying to help some of the refugee children, two of whom had burn injuries and another who had a traumatic brain injury. Alissa wanted to convince the families to help these children by taking them to see the medical

personnel, but because of her lack of training in Arabic language and culture, she could not. These emotionally affecting experiences influenced her decision to study Arabic when she returned from duty. Though Alissa eventually became a French teacher, she stated that being able to share her intercultural experiences in Iraq and her knowledge of the language made her a better language teacher in general. Past educational and emotional experiences became strong influential motivators for her to study Arabic language and culture.

There is another, more elusive, type of motivation, which was revealed in interviews, but had also been apparent in my Arabic language and culture classes. I termed it the quest for clarification, or “illumination” (Nichols, 2010). Illuminative motivation combines aspects of both integrative and influential motivation. Most participants indicated that studying Arabic helped them in achieving clarification or clearer understanding of what had happened to them in Iraq. Taking Arabic language and culture classes “illuminates” their language and/or cultural experiences and allows them to put them into perspective, or a more meaningful context. Sharing and discussing language and culture may serve as a type of “debriefing” for the veterans. The presence of illumination became apparent in the interviews in a variety of forms. Some made direct expressions of this illumination:

“Well, taking these classes helped me to make sense of what happened when I was there” (Quinn – pseudonym)

Further examples emerged as each discussed the Arabic dialect they had heard while deployed. For two of the participants, learning Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) brought about a stronger understanding of the Amiyya dialect they had learned in Iraq. They explained, “I’m starting to see where the similarities are with the Amiyya...just some pronunciation differences and small grammar stuff,” and, “... I couldn’t understand why sometimes they said qiffee and sometimes just qif. So the day came in class when we conjugated waqafa [to stop] completely...Then I was like ‘oh! That’s why there is a difference.”

Formal coursework also helped veterans process the political situation in which they were playing an integral role in Iraq. Malcolm (pseudonym) originally believed Saddam Hussein had little to do with September 11th and that we were fighting in the wrong place, but after

reading histories and learning more about the region, he developed strong convictions that our military presence was vital to United States national security. Processing concepts from his coursework changed his perspective considerably. Another participant, Connor (pseudonym), went through a similar illuminative process in his Arabic language and culture classes. During deployment, he had become disillusioned as his company tried to get two groups of Iraqis to work together. In his words, "...it made the whole thing really hard because it was kind of like negotiating with four-year-olds. So then in our Middle East Studies class *and* in our Arabic class, like on the same day in fact, we learned about the Sunni-Shia divide. And I just knew I had been right the whole time, and so was our commanding officer. These guys were never going to get along." Though this participant's conclusions are somewhat disappointing, especially after additional education in the history, language and culture, it continues to demonstrate illumination in that he had learned that there are indeed deep historical and cultural reasons for the differences within the community. Perhaps, with better training prior to deployment, our military personnel could address these differences during negotiations for more successful outcomes.

The illumination effect contributed to motivating veterans to learn MSA and more about the culture post-deployment. The exact psychological mechanism that triggers illumination is unclear, but evidence of illumination arose conspicuously in post-deployment education. Veteran students consistently reported instances of learning material in their classes that filled gaps and enhanced their understandings of Arabic language and culture and of their interactions with Iraqis while deployed. At times, they felt satisfaction when reaffirming that what they had learned while deployed was reliable information. Linguistically, much of what they had learned was dialect, and even though it differed from their classroom Arabic, moments of enlightenment validated their linguistic experiences. When they connected with classroom material, they felt that moment of discovery, so important in achieving goals: "Oh, that's what was going on!" There suddenly exists a much more complete picture of something that was fragmented.

Perhaps re-conceptualizing Dornyei's Language Motivation System (2005) to include "illumination" could look like Figure 2.

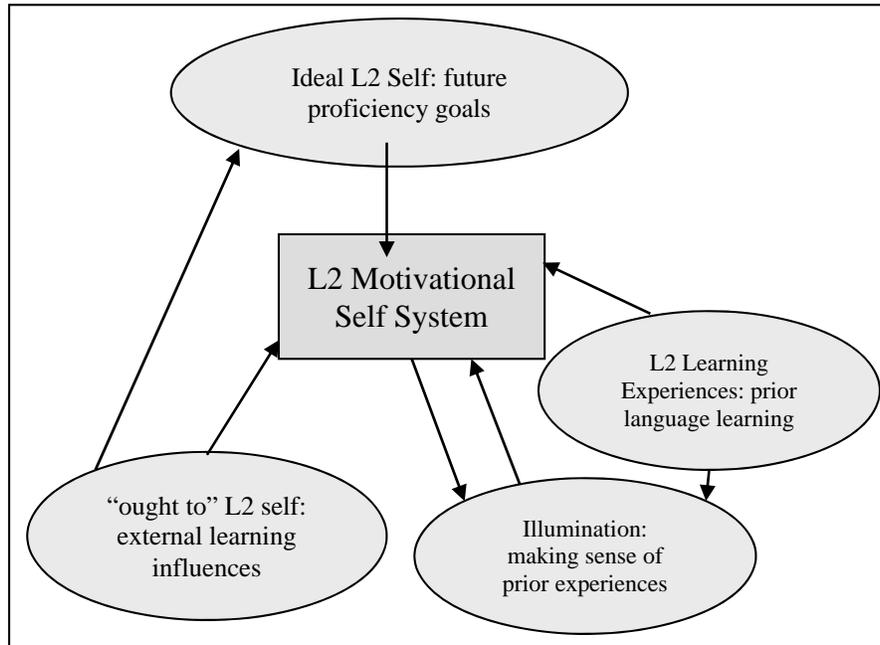


Fig. 2

The L2 Motivational Self System for the veteran participants includes illumination, which feeds into their motivational selves as their motivation helps them to process their experiences in Iraq. However, to know exactly how, when, and where illumination falls into this system requires further study.

### Conclusions

This research endeavored to discover underlying reasons for these veterans' decision to learn Arabic language and culture post-deployment and to find out if their intercultural and linguistic experiences while they were deployed in Iraq influenced their academic decisions. Overwhelmingly, the data revealed that the veterans' time in Iraq did influence their decisions to learn the language, for a number of specific reasons. In light of current motivation theories, the participants of this study showed significant similarities to findings in studies conducted by Gardner (1972), Dornyei (1994, 1996, 2001 and

2003), Dornyei et al. (2005), Ehrman (1996), and Samimy and Tabuse (1992). This supports current motivation theory, which proposes a complex psychological process operative within students of the foreign language classroom. Following is a discussion of the major motivators identified from the data collected and of how these support motivation theories proposed by Gardner (1972) and Dornyei (1996). The results compel Arabic language teachers (and foreign language educators in general) to explore a variety of methodologies within the foreign language classroom in order to draw upon a complex motivational milieu.

### ***Motivation in Iraq War Veterans***

As shown and discussed in the data analysis, when all participants were asked about their main motivations for learning Arabic language and culture post-deployment, all participants stated that their experiences in Iraq motivated them to learn the Arabic language. It was apparent from their answers that both instrumental and integrative reasons for learning Arabic language and culture (Gardner and Lambert, 1959 and 1972; Dornyei, 2003) were operative among the veterans. Yet it is also appropriate to apply Norton's (2000) postulation that motivation in language learning is more complex than described by Gardner and Lambert (1959) and Dornyei (1994, 2003, and 2005). Previous exposure to Arabic language and culture in Iraq had added to the context of their language learning in an academic setting.

This research study confirms findings in previous studies by aforementioned authors and supports current language learning motivation models and constructs. However, apparent with these veterans is the notion that there is an emotional factor that also plays a role in their language learning motivation (Gardner, 2000): a factor I refer to as "illumination." This emotional factor finds its way into the foreign language classroom and can have an effect on how veterans relate to the language teacher and to their previous experiences. It may cause them to redefine their experiences, or may shed light on these in a way that allows the veteran to better process the mental and emotional stress of going to war. This emotional factor may be more thoroughly studied within the field of social psychology, but cannot be ignored in the classroom.

### ***Broader Implications***

The need for illumination/clarification among veterans suggests broader implications for Arabic language education funding—as with other critical languages—at the K-12 level. The veterans in the study underwent pronounced changes in their perspectives toward learning language and culture as a result of their deployment in an Arabic-speaking country (which also strongly influenced their academic decisions later on). Prior to enlisting, they were not given the opportunity to learn about Arabic language and culture through their various high schools. Given the impact first-hand exposure to the language and culture had on their academic decisions, perhaps more attention should be paid to funding critical languages at the K-12 level.

There are also broader implications for the effect that our lack of language and cultural understanding has on the safety and security of US military abroad (Osborn, 2005). All the veterans reported that they realized the importance of learning the language only after they had been deployed—some had known Arabic was important and tried to learn it beforehand, but the full realization of its impact did not hit them until critical moments (Webster and Mertova, 2007) in their deployment. These critical moments, as recounted in their narratives, developed into a desire to learn the language post-deployment. Perhaps we can better serve our veteran communities by improving the quality of language education prior to the enlistment age of 18 (Bell, 1986).

Expanding on this logic means that if United States soldiers are experiencing massive failures of communication in the battlefield, which endanger their lives and the lives of the civilians they are meant to protect, then we are experiencing massive failures in our understanding of military intelligence. Without an adequate understanding of Arabic language and culture, our military cannot accurately perceive and responsibly assess battlefield situations. In this way, lack of Arabic language and cultural understanding is a detriment to national security as a whole.

## Recommendations

Drawing upon veterans' experiences in Arabic language and culture adds dimension to the learning experience for all students. The increased number of veterans in Arabic classrooms places increased responsibility on educators to find ways for veterans to achieve their educational goals. We must understand what factors compel them (Oxford & Shearin, 1996). Though their motivational milieu is complex, there are some relatively straightforward practices a teacher can employ to tap into veterans' wealth of experiences, thus enriching the classroom context:

- Keep lesson plans flexible, allowing time for comparing and contrasting dialects and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)
- Establish conversational periods that deal with relevant current events and cultural topics.
- Establish conversational periods or plan presentations in which veterans might share cultural experiences (being sensitive to what might make them or their classmates uncomfortable, or what might be classified information).
- Infuse the classroom with as much cultural enrichment as possible. Use authentic food, clothing, children's literature, icons, etc., which the veterans might share from their deployment.
- Encourage, listen to, and welcome veterans' stories of their experiences.

Veterans have important stories to tell, and what they tell may enrich not only Arabic classrooms, but other classrooms as well. The illuminative affect that learning Arabic has on many of these veterans warrants further investigation into further possibly psychological benefits that education can have on veterans' well-being as well as how they can bring their experiences into the academic setting and incorporate them into something productive and informative. Recognizing what motivates them and affirming their experiences within the Arabic language and culture classroom may yield very satisfying "teachable moments" from which we can all learn.

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## **Appendix A: Sample Veteran Narrative**

### **Brent's Case Narrative**

Brent is a white male with a bachelor's degree in Security & Intelligence studies and with a minor in ALC from a large Midwestern university, to which he had transferred from a local community college. Brent's commission required that his recorded interview and interview notes be kept confidential in order to protect his identity. However, certain non-sensitive elements relevant to his ALC training, previous language history, and duties while deployed in Iraq are included.

### ***Brent's demographic data, prior language training, & job duties***

He joined the United States Marine Corps (USMC) Reserves as an enlisted soldier and served one tour of duty in Iraq before attending college. Brent had learned some high school Spanish, but he stated that he did not remember any of it. He stated that he joined the USMC Reserves for a number of reasons – the two primary being to serve his country and to help pay for his college education. Brent explained that he had always wanted to join the USMC and to learn about other cultures, but his interest in the Middle East was peaked after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Upon learning of his deployment to Iraq, Brent began reading as much about the region as he could. He was unable to take formal classes but he used the Internet to research and read as much as possible even though it was difficult for him to discern what sources were credible. He was aware that there was bias, but didn't know enough about the region to know how to recognize it.

Immediately before their deployment, Brent's unit participated in a one-week class on Islam, Arabic history, culture and language. An Iraqi national taught the course. Brent did not know if this type of training was common for US Marines deployed to Iraq. He said the class was very interesting and that the teacher was very friendly, which put many of his colleagues at ease. Brent felt that many of his colleagues had had very negative opinions of Arab nationals and especially Iraqis before the course, though he did not feel he shared their negative opinions. After the week long training course and interacting with the Iraqi teacher, some of his colleagues seemed to become more accepting. In the class, they were taught some basic words and phrases. Then one evening before they deployed, the

teacher taught them some Arabic profanity, when they took him out for drinks. According to Brent, this was a real bonding process for the Marines in his unit. Even though they did not have any more contact with that instructor, the social contact changed his colleagues' attitudes so that when they began their job duties in Iraq involving extensive contact with local Iraqi civilians, they were more sympathetic.

***Brent's intercultural interactions, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes***

Brent's most notable experience in Iraq involved an older Iraqi woman who approached his squad while they were on patrol. The woman had been holding a plastic bag and holding her hand out to them as well as gesturing. There had been a number of incidents that week involving female suicide bombers, so Brent's unit was on guard for any suspicious activity. Brent felt frustration that he did not know the language well enough to communicate effectively with the woman. The only word he remembered at the time was 'qif', meaning 'stop.' The woman had stopped but Brent stated that he could tell she was desperately trying to communicate something to his unit. Their location was somewhat precarious since they had stopped immediately before an intersection.

Apartment-type buildings with multiple stories surrounded them and they were tasked with securing that particular block for safe troop movements. He knew they were vulnerable in their position but they could not move forward until the situation with the Iraqi civilian had been resolved. The woman remained in the intersection for almost two and a half hours while his unit waited for a translator to arrive from another city. He felt sympathy for the woman because not only was she elderly, but she was also suffering from thirst in the oppressive heat and Brent couldn't give her any water. Moving forward to her direct location could have resulted in the detonation of an improvised explosive device (IED) so he and the rest of his colleagues in his unit were ordered to stay in their present location until they could accurately analyze the situation with the use of the translator.

Brent's frustration peaked when they finally discovered that the woman was warning them that a sniper with a rocket launcher had been waiting in a building around the corner, presumably to fire at

them. She had come to warn Brent's unit. However, because of the language barrier, not only did she have to yell out her information to them from half a block away, putting herself in danger, but in the two and half hours it took for the translator to arrive, the armed sniper was able to avoid capture. He stated that just some simple phrases such as 'corner,' 'sniper,' 'window,' and some pointing could have resulted in the capture of an insurgent and thus further securing the city, which was what they were tasked to do.

When asked about his experience with translators in Iraq, Brent explained that translators were in high demand and there were too few of them to accompany every single unit on every mission. He did not have much contact with them, because, for some reason, which he was unable to explain, his unit was not assigned a translator even though they had daily interactions with local Iraqi citizens. Perhaps, because his unit was tasked with securing streets and did not enter homes, they were not expected to need a translator all the time. However, as the incident with the elderly Iraqi woman proved, there were times that the language barrier put them in more danger than would have existed if they had learned some Arabic prior to deployment.

#### ***Brent's post-deployment education, experiences & motivation***

Upon Brent's return, he began taking Arabic classes along with other coursework toward a bachelor's degree. He was attending part-time both the local community college and a four-year institution. Enrolling at both institutions allowed him to take a large number of credit hours, including two and three classes of ALC simultaneously in one academic quarter, which helped him save on the tuition money that was available to him through the GI Bill.

He stated that he was not someone who learned language easily, so he found the Arabic classes difficult. He wanted to finish the more challenging classes first so he would have less academic stress closer to the completion of his degree. He explained that the Arabic language classes offered more academic Arabic rather than speaking, which was not as practical for his language learning and career goals. He intended to return to Iraq either in the military or working for a private company to help in the rebuilding of Iraq. Brent was uncertain at that point in exactly what capacity he would return to Iraq, but he

was adamant about returning. I asked him if he felt his experiences in Iraq contributed to his motivations to learn Arabic. He responded that it was definitely the reason he was taking ALC classes. He would not have tried to tackle a language as difficult as Arabic if he had not been to Iraq and had not had the experience. He also realized after he was exposed to some formal Arabic learning how much important information he had missed during his deployment. The more he learned about the history and culture of the Middle East, the more he reflected. His perspective had definitely changed, but he could not elaborate on how his intercultural experiences and subsequent language training effected the perspective change. His opinions regarding the Middle East, in the abstract were negative, but when he experienced intercultural contact on a person-to-person level, he did not share the same biases as his colleagues. He confessed that he had some negative attitudes toward the Middle East before he was deployed and before his college coursework were negative, but he did not share his colleagues' negative biases against Arabs before their deployment. He seemed to be very unbiased toward the Iraqi instructor who taught their one-week pre-deployment class.

Though Brent was adamant that his Iraq experiences motivated him to learn the language, he indicated that he had gone as far as he could with coursework in ALC in an academic context. He believed upper level classes focusing on Middle Eastern literature were outside the scope of his language ability and language goals. He wanted to concentrate on advanced level Arabic conversation, which was not part of the college coursework offered. At least, that was the impression he was given by other students in the Arabic program. He had also discussed coursework with professors who could not explain to his satisfaction how a focus on Arabic historical literature and Arabic poetry would provide training in conversational skills. He did not want to spend money on classes not geared toward his linguistic and career goals. He believed he would learn more by personal intercultural contact with "native" speakers (people of Arabic origin). When asked if he preferred a teacher of Arab origin, he replied he liked having instructors, who learned "from scratch," as he had, but he desired one or two sessions a week in a dialect, which would make him feel his training was more comprehensive. Because his university did not offer that, he wanted to pursue dialect training after graduating.

He did not know how much he would use language in his career, but he was certain that knowing the language would be an important tool for him in the future.

***Brent Summary***

Brent had little knowledge of Arabic language and culture prior to his military experience, but stated interest in other cultures. He seemed to embrace the little training he received prior to his deployment. His deployment influenced his motivation to learn the language and even solidified his language learning goals. His most influential and memorable intercultural experience while deployed in Iraq centered on the language barrier issue. Though he did not attain advanced level proficiency through his college coursework, he planned to continue studying the language on his own.