

# **Heritage and Non-Heritage Language Learners in Arabic Classrooms: Inter and Intra-group Beliefs, Attitudes and Perceptions**

**Ghazi Abuhakema**  
**College of Charleston**

## **Abstract**

This study examines how Arabic heritage language learners (HLLs) and non-heritage language learners (non-HLLs) perceive each other, and the class dynamics in a combined classroom setting. Two groups of HLLs and non-HLLs completed a separate questionnaire and answered follow-up open-ended questions. The results show that learners do not feel strongly about mixing or separation, but they also acknowledge that just as there are disadvantages to combining, there are advantages as well. While instructors need to capitalize on the advantages to create a more engaging and more successful teaching environment for both groups, they also need to be aware of the disadvantages in order to counteract them. The study also shows that the particular diglossic situation of Arabic seems to have impacted students' perceptions and attitudes. The implications and recommendations of the study are quite relevant to schools similar to where the study was conducted. The study makes it possible for the voices of HLLs and non-HLLs to reach educators and administrators and empower them in their research processes to inform the teaching of heritage languages.

**Key words:** Heritage language education, student beliefs, less commonly taught languages, combined and separate classroom setting, language classroom management

## Introduction

Arabic is one of the fastest growing Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) in American schools and universities. In its 2009 annual report, the Modern Language Association (MLA) survey of US higher education reported that the total number of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in Arabic programs was 35,083, a significant increase from 23,974 in 2006. Arabic had the largest percentage growth (46.3) and it became the eighth most studied language in the US. According to the report, students' incentives for learning Arabic varied. Some wanted to pursue a military or diplomatic career, others wanted to learn more about the Quran and Islamic culture, and many simply loved the language, some students aimed at higher levels of proficiency that would allow them to function more appropriately and effectively in professional settings. In addition, many heritage students wanted to learn the language of their indigenous culture and ancestors.

The U.S. Department of State classifies Arabic as one of thirteen critical languages, and Federal Government Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP), identifies Arabic as a "language of the future." The teaching of Arabic as a Foreign Language (TAFL) has witnessed an unprecedented expansion, especially after the tragic events of 9/11. Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies departments witnessed a significant increase in the number of enrolled students. Additionally, more programs were founded and more course offerings were added. (MacDonald, 2005; Gordon, 2006; Morrison, 2003; Murphy, 2004).

For many native English speakers, learning Arabic can be a daunting task. To accomplish proficiency in Arabic, the Foreign Service Institute estimates that it would take double the amount of class time needed for other languages such as Hebrew, and four times that for Romance languages such as Spanish. Morrison (2003) discussed three difficulties in teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) in the United States: Diglossia, the difference between Arabic and other languages, and the scarcity of appropriate teaching materials.

## Arabic as a Heritage Language

The increase in the number of students wanting to learn Arabic poses a specific challenge when heritage language learners (HLLs) and non-heritage language learners (non-HLLs) learn together. Many schools and universities in the United States do not offer special classes for Arabic heritage students. Hence both groups end up learning in the same classroom using the same materials and are assessed based on the same criteria. As with other languages, program coordinators simply consider “the background of heritage students and try to accommodate their needs to the best of their ability” (Geisherick, 2004) despite their mixed abilities.

The term *heritage languages* (HL) has been defined in narrow and broad senses. While, for instance, Cho, Shin, and Krashen (2004) use the term narrowly to refer to the language spoken by immigrants who immigrated at a young age, or by their children, Valdes (2005) uses it broadly to refer to languages spoken by nonsocietal linguistic minorities, in particular, “languages of immigrant, refugee, and indigenous people” (Cummins, 2005, p. 586). To these, Wiley (2005) adds “former colonial languages” (p.595), and Fisherman (2001) emphasizes personal relevance in defining HLLs.

Arabic heritage students are a heterogeneous group of learners. They bring to the classroom diverse competences, motivations and learning goals. They also come with varying levels of proficiency in their respective dialects. HL proficiency can be the result of interconnected factors: age, exposure rate to heritage language, family or household exposure, dialect, social networks, connection to the country of origin, and prior formal or literacy training. Consequently, Ryding (2006) emphasized the need to research those literary skills before articulating any goals and methods, or designing curricula. Since heritage education is a relatively new field, instructors are not well equipped with the necessary skills to successfully function in such an environment. Moreover, instructional materials targeting HLLs are lacking. Li and Duff (2008) noted that “the foreign language textbooks produced in North America are ill-suited for HL learners, with their coverage of basic grammar, survival vocabulary, and everyday routines such as

greetings” (p. 26). In a review of Scalera’s documentary film *I speak Arabic*, S’hiri (2004: 2) wrote, “Another challenge learners and teachers of heritage Arabic face is a scarcity of resources and, until very recently, the absence of a methodology oriented toward teaching heritage learners.”

Few studies examined the issue of heritage students in Arabic classrooms from different perspectives. Ibrahim and Allam (2001) investigated the motivation, linguistic levels, and parents’ motivation of the Arabic heritage students enrolled in Arabic classes at the American University in Cairo. The study highlighted the difficulty of combined classes, and concluded that “addressing the concerns of one type of students was impossible” (p. 437).

From a broader perspective, Ayoubi (2004) examined the history, development, and significance of AFL to the Arab immigrant population in Dearborn, MI. Meanwhile, Bale (2010) examined Arabic as a heritage language in the US; focusing on its history, its current status, and future prospects.

The field of Arabic studies in the United States is a highly sensitive field, and can be problematic for pedagogical and political reasons. Most of the Arabic heritage learners speak a variety of Arabic that is different from that which is taught in schools. These dialects have different lexicons, phonological variations, and morphological and syntactic rules. Moreover, most of these heritage learners are not aware of the formal grammatical rules, and may have a broader vocabulary inventory. Qualified teachers who know how to address these characteristics of HLLs are a rarity. These challenges are even more problematic for teachers who are nonnative speakers of Arabic. Heritage Arabic speakers may not identify with or appreciate a nonnative speaker of Arabic as a teacher. On the other hand, HLLs of Arabic may be stigmatized due to the tragic events of 9/11 or due to overwhelming negative stereotypes presented by media sources.

## Rationale of the Study

Combining HL and non-HL learners is a common phenomenon in many foreign language classrooms. Marcos (1999) and Kondo-Brown (2003), for instance, noted that most HL learners who desire to learn their home language in higher education institutions have usually had no choice but to study the language in traditional foreign language classrooms alongside non-heritage learners. Many educators and language professionals believe that the presence of these heritage students can impede the progress of traditional learners by intimidating them and their instructors (Kagan & Dillon, 2001). Additionally, non-heritage students may also resent heritage speakers, since some or even many are studying a language they already know (Peytpon, Lewelling, & Winke, 2001).

This phenomenon has been investigated in several languages and in different contexts. Language educators and practitioners have proposed theoretical frameworks to conceptualize the challenges and the differences in language skills between both groups. Despite this, the teaching of HL learners as a field of study is still not well established. (Kono & McGinnis, 2001). More importantly, the empirical studies that support the claim that the linguistic behavior of HL and non-HL learners is different are few, have been done on a small scale, and are still in their early stages (Kondo, 2003). At the same time, the two-track-classes, although supported by study findings, cannot be easily implemented due to the unavailability of needed infrastructure (Xiao, 2006), and only exist for students with beginning or intermediate proficiency levels (Kondo-Brown, 2003). HLLs with higher proficiency will still be placed with non-heritage learners in high level language classes.

Li and Duff (2006) emphasized the need to research whether there are advantages (or disadvantages) in mixed classes and how to make use of the advantages and counteract the disadvantages. Using an adapted version of the Dörnyei (2002) and Dörnyei and Kormos (2000) survey, Weger (2006) investigated Chinese students' beliefs by looking at how heritage influenced construction of their social identities, motivation, and classroom activities.

In combined Arabic classrooms, it is assumed that non-HLLs will feel intimidated by HLLs who may have a higher proficiency. It should be borne in mind, however, that MSA is, in most formal instructional settings, the variety that is being taught. Just as non-HLLs may struggle with Arabic as a new language, HLLs may struggle with MSA since it is not their mother tongue, and they lack the necessary literacy skills needed to learn it. MSA is a variety that most heritage students may not have learned or to which they were not exposed in their households.

Through examining these aspects, and other dynamics of the Arabic classroom, the present study will help Arabic program coordinators and language instructors make adjustments in ways that enable them to accommodate heritage students and their needs, use appropriate resources for each group, and decrease the degree of intimidation among traditional language learners (or even both). This study will also provide information to instructors as to how non-HLLs feel and what they believe about a unified class where other students may have higher language proficiency. The research questions that guide this study are:

1. How do HLLs and non-HLLs view each other, the language classroom, and instructors' pedagogy and behavior in the same teaching setting?
2. What pedagogical implications can be drawn from understanding students' beliefs and perceptions in a combined classroom setting?
3. Based on students' beliefs and perceptions, what can educators, language instructors, and policy makers do to deal with this situation and alleviate any concerns either or both groups may exhibit?

### **Setting**

The study took place at a major US university. The Arabic program at this university, like many Arabic language programs in the United States after the tragic events of September 11, was formally established in a post-9/11 context. Previously, Arabic was taught, but no degrees were granted. Arabic courses were only offered as service courses. Recently, the university approved a minor proposal in the Arabic language. The region where the university is located has one

of the largest Arabic-speaking communities in the country, and remains a favored destination for new arrivals from the Arab world (Arab American Institute Foundation, 2003)<sup>1</sup>. Thus, it is not surprising to find that about 60-70% (sometimes more) of the students in the Arabic classes at the university are heritage students. Although introductory courses in Arabic are designated as heritage or non-heritage courses, students tend to register for what fits their schedule, or, in many cases, to obtain good grades due to their prior language background in Arabic (an assumption yet to be examined). The Department that oversees the program, like all other academic units and divisions at the university, does not have the right to override students' decisions regarding enrollment. Recently a placement test was implemented to attempt to solve the problem of "mixed" classrooms. The test focuses on vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension. A listening and speaking placement test is yet to be created. In addition to assessing students' language proficiency in general, one goal of the test was to keep advanced heritage students out of first year classes. Still, there is the concern that some (if not many) may intentionally perform poorly on the test to be placed at a lower level hoping for a good grade. The test remains part of the solution, and other issues such as appropriate material and teachers' preparedness still need to be addressed. The problem persists, and the combination of heritage and non-heritage remains inescapable.

## Method

### Participants

Fifty Seven students, enrolled in five courses of Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL), took part in the study. Two of these courses were beginning, two were intermediate and one was advanced. Thirty four participants were HLLs, while twenty three were non-HLLs. At the beginning level, there were sixteen HLLs

---

<sup>1</sup> The term *Arab* as an ethnic group is not listed on the U.S. Census Bureau. Therefore, the author cited this source.

and twelve non-HLLs; at the intermediate level, there were thirteen HLLs and nine non-HLLs, and at the advanced level, there were five HLLs and 2 non-HLLs. Among the HLLs, only five students were pursuing a degree in Arabic; twenty four were not, and two were undecided. Three students did not provide a response. Of the thirty four heritage students, eighteen spoke Arabic at home while four did not, and fourteen spoke it “sometimes”. The majority of the heritage students had studied Arabic in a formal setting for one year, while seven had done so for two or more years. A larger number of non-HLLs (9 students) were pursuing a degree in Arabic, although none spoke or practiced Arabic outside the classroom. All teachers were native speakers of Arabic. Table 1 shows the biographical data for both groups.

Table 1. Participants’ Biographical Information

	Heritage Learners			Non-Heritage Learners
Number of students	34			23
Beginning level	16			12
Intermediate level	13			9
Advanced level	5			2
Pursue degree in Arabic	5			9
Speak Arabic at home	Always	Sometimes	Did not	0
	18	14	4	
Years of Studying Arabic	1 year	2 or more		1
year	2 or more			
	27	7		20
Motivation to Learn Arabic				
Cultural Interest	14			9
Language Requirement	2			3
Professional	8			10
Academic	6			8
Liturgical: Reading Koran	15			8
Communicative	18			14



## Survey

Two slightly different surveys were administered: One for HLLs and the other for non-HLLs. Each survey consisted of two sections. The first section in both surveys consisted of six items soliciting biographical data: The students' intended use of Arabic, whether they spoke Arabic at home or not, whether they spoke Arabic with relatives and friends, how long they had studied Arabic, their motivation for studying Arabic, and for what skills they wanted to use the language. The second section included seventeen items for both groups. This section solicited students' feelings, beliefs and perceptions about studying Arabic alongside traditional learners. The major areas of the survey solicited students' responses with regard to their views of 1) intimidation and motivation in a combined setting, 2) language skills, culture and separate tracks, 3) instruction and class management, and 4) course difficulty and pace. Possible responses ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) on a Likert scale. In addition to the first two sections, eight open ended questions were asked (see appendix 1 and 2). Students were asked to comment on any statements in the survey, expanding their opinions and feelings on any other advantages or disadvantages of studying in a combined class. Students were also asked to argue for or against combined courses, and to comment on practices they found both helpful in managing the combined class and catering to the needs of both groups. They were also asked to compare their Arabic courses with other language courses they had taken previously and to give advice for heritage or non-heritage students who may find themselves in similar situations. Finally, students were asked to comment on what they thought professors and peers should know about their own experience learning the language in a mixed setting.

The questionnaires were devised for this study as no similar instrument was readily available to measure all the items under investigation. To ensure validity, the questionnaires were administered after receiving feedback from colleagues in the field who have taught combined language classes. Based on feedback, the topics and the wording of some items were modified. The questionnaires were piloted on a group of students, and changes were

made based on their responses. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained to formally administer the questionnaires.

### **Procedure**

Based on a preliminary questionnaire, instructors divided students into two groups (HLL and Non-HLL) in regards to whether or not Arabic was spoken in the student's household. The questionnaires were administered by a third party, a teaching assistant (TA) from another program, during class hours in the spring semester of 2009. Participation was voluntary and students were asked to sign a consent form. As one of the course instructors, the principal investigator had access to the results after students were assigned their final grades. Before administering the questionnaires, the TA explained to the participants that there were no right or wrong answers; and that the goal of the study was to improve the quality of teaching Arabic at the institution and to overcome some of the difficulties students may encounter while studying Arabic. The TA also assured students that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that their responses would be kept confidential. All students present in classes chose to participate. Due to the difficulty of assembling students as a focus group, they answered the focus group questions on paper during the same week.

### **Data Analysis**

Frequencies were used to determine the percentage of learners' degree of agreement or disagreement with each item in the questionnaires. A response of 1 or 2 was categorized as *Agree*. Responses of 4 and 5 were categorized as *Disagree*, and a designated response of 3 was considered *Neutral*. No responses were entered as 0's. Table 2 shows the results obtained from HLLs, while Table 3 shows those obtained from non-HLLs. Secondly, a t-test was used to determine whether the two populations differ significantly in twelve similar items in the two questionnaires. Other items applied to one group but not the other, and thus were not included in calculating the t-tests (see Table 4 for a list of these items). Finally, the open-ended questions were analyzed through developing categories for the common themes that emerged from the answers and coding such themes to match the major areas covered in the survey.

## Results

The following three tables show the results of the study. Items are numbered under separate subheadings. Table 2 shows the percentages of heritage participants who agreed or disagreed with each statement in the survey, Table 3 shows the percentages of non-heritage participants. Table 4 provides a summary of the statistical analysis.

Table 2. *Heritage Language Learners' Responses*

No.	Item
	Agree
	Neutral
	Disagree

---

### Intimidation and Motivation

- 1 I think that mixing non-HLLs with HLLs is beneficial particularly for lower-level language non-HLLS.  
65%  
15%  
20%
  
- 2 The non-heritage speakers seem intimidated by the fact that there are many heritage speakers in the language class.  
41%  
24%  
35%
  
- 3 The presence of non-heritage speakers decreases my motivation to learn Arabic.  
24%  
62%  
14%

- 4 I am as happy to work in a group with non-HLLs as I am to work with other HLLs.  
88%  
9%  
3%
- 5 My non-HL classmates respect me and appreciate my contributions to class.  
85%  
15%  
0.0%

### **Language Skills, culture and separate tracks**

- 6 The mix of students in my course allows us to learn a lot about our classmates' cultures.  
88%  
6%  
6%
- 7 I believe that I can learn from the insights and contributions of the non-heritage speakers in my courses.  
79%  
15%  
6%
- 8 I sympathize with the non-heritage speakers in my classes because of their limited language skills in Arabic.  
68%  
12%  
20%
- 9 I feel impatient when non-HL learners express  
9%  
12%  
79%

- 10 There should be separate sections of language courses for heritage speakers and non-heritage speakers.  
47%  
9%  
44%

### **Instruction and Class Management**

- 11 The teacher involves HL learners more.  
6%  
24%  
70%
- 12 The teacher calls on HL and non-HL learners equally.  
91%  
0.0%  
9%
- 13 HLLs try to help the non-HLLs.  
94%  
0.0%  
6%
- 14 There has to be two sets of standards for grading assignments and tests.  
20%  
27%  
53%

### **Course Difficulty and Pace**

- 15 The presence of non-HL learners seems to affect my professors' expectations as to pace and material coverage.  
29%  
27%  
44%

- 16 The pace of the course is slower than it should be because of the presence of the non-HLLs.  
8%  
15%  
77%
- 17 The level of the course is less challenging because of the presence of the non-HLLs.  
8%  
15%  
77%

---

Agree = responses 1 and 2; Disagree = responses 4 and 5;  
Neutral = 3

Table 3. Non-heritage Language Learners' Responses

No.	Item
	Agree
	Neutral
	Disagree

---

### Intimidation and Motivation

- 1 I feel intimidated by the presence of HLLs.  
35%  
17%  
48%
- 2 The presence of HLLs decreases motivation.  
26%  
26%  
48%

- 3 I think that mixing non-HLLs with HLLs is beneficial.  
69%  
22%  
9%
- 4 Having HL learners makes me feel good because I'm reminded that even their language skills need polishing.  
74%  
13%  
13%
- 5 I feel that my HLL peers respect my contributions.  
65%  
17.5%  
17.5%

### **Language Skills, Culture and Separate Tracks**

- 6 The presence of HLLs is good for language skills.  
65%  
22%  
13%
- 7 I learn about Arab culture from my HLLs.  
78%  
9%  
13%
- 8 The presence of HL learners has helped me understand and feel more comfortable with a variety of dialects.  
52%  
26%  
22%
- 9 I have difficulty understanding HLLs' speech.  
57%  
98%  
39%

- 10 There should be separate courses for HL and non-HL learners.  
 44%  
 17%  
 39%

### **Instruction, Class Management**

- 11 The presence of HL learners impedes instruction.  
 52%  
 39%  
 9%
- 12 The teacher calls on HL learners more than non-heritage.  
 4%  
 4%  
 92%
- 13 The teacher involves HL and non-HL students equally.  
 92%  
 4%  
 4%
- 14 There should be two different sets of standards in grading assignments and tests.  
 22%  
 17%  
 61%

### **Course Difficulty and Pace**

- 15 The fact that there are HL learners in class affects my professors' expectations in terms of material coverage.  
 26%  
 22%  
 52%



- 16 The course pace is faster due to HL learners' presence.  
 26%  
 13%  
 61%
- 17 The course level harder due to HL learners' presence.  
 13%  
 13%  
 74%

---

Agree = responses 1 and 2; Disagree = responses 4 and 5; Neutral = 3

### *Intimidation and Motivation*

The study shows that a slight majority of the HL (65%) and non-HL learners (69%) believe that mixing is beneficial for non-HLLs, particularly in lower level classes. In terms of feeling intimidated, for example, only 35% of non-HLLs feel intimidated working in a class that has HLLs. A higher percentage (48%) of HLLs disagrees and does not feel intimidated. However, 42% of these HLLs indicated that non-HLLs appear intimidated by their presence, especially when they spoke, or when “the questions are answered so easily by the Arab students,” as one HLL commented on the non-HLLs' attitudes over classroom interaction. For some of the non-HLLs, the problem is not the pure presence of HLLs, but rather the presence of those who previously studied the language in earlier stages.

One student commented:

I do not have a problem with heritage speaking students [as individuals]. I have a problem with people who already have known language material starting in a beginning section [referring to heritage students with previous language background]. I feel it changes the way the course is taught whether this is done overtly or not is a different question.

In fact, a heritage student confessed of his and other HLLs' linguistic limitations and said, “Non-native students should not be

intimidated by heritage/native speakers. Being a native speaker myself, I have many difficulties that the non-native speaker is excellent in.”

The data revealed that the presence of the HLLs in the classroom can be a motivating factor. Among non-HLLs, 48% disagree that the presence of HLLs decreases their motivation. Only 26% agree. On the other hand, HLLs do not regard the presence or absence of non-HLLs as a motivating factor; 62% had no strong opinion. Only 24% agreed that the presence of non-HLLs decreases their motivation. In a similar vein, 74% of non-HLLs feel good about having heritage students as classmates because they are reminded that “heritage” does not mean “proficient”. One student comments:

I am motivated by non-Arab students because it shows me that even people who aren't heritage students appreciate and want to learn my language. It makes me want to learn it so much more (and appreciate it more).

In general, a majority of non-HLLs (65%) believe that having HLLs in the same class can be beneficial for their learning skills. Moreover, 69% of non-HLLs and 88% of HLLs are happy to work in a group with each other.

Additionally, the study shows that 65% of non-HLLs feel that heritage classmates respect their contribution to the class. 85% of HLLs feel that their non-heritage peers do the same. At the same time, 68% sympathize with non-HLLs in their classes because of their limited language skills in Arabic, while 94% indicated their desire to help non-HLLs.

### *Language Skills, Culture, and Separate Tracks*

The current study shows that non-HLLs are roughly equally divided regarding separation: 46% agree, while only 39% disagree. For the HLLs, the numbers are even more closely aligned: 47% of HLLs agree that the two groups should be placed in separate tracks while 44% of them disagree.

The study shows that 65% of non-HLLs report that having HLLs in their classes is good for their language skills. In particular, 52% say that this exposure makes them more comfortable with a

variety of Arabic dialects (when presented). Yet such exposure does not always increase understanding, since 57% of non-HLLs state that they have difficulty understanding HLLs when they speak. On the other hand, 68% of HLLs showed sympathy with non-HLLs due to their limited language skills, but expressed that "... Also the pronunciation will be better by the heritage students and that allows the non heritage student to hear the words being said correctly more often, enabling them to then repeat them," as one HLL put it.

In terms of cultural awareness, 78% of non-HLLs and 88% of HLLs agree that mixing allows them to learn about each other's cultures and offers an invaluable opportunity for cultural exchange by providing "cultural/religious insights," as one student wrote. Moreover, 79% of HLLs indicate that they can learn from the insights and contributions of non-HLLs in their courses, as one student puts it, "Both have something to bring to the table. Non heritage students usually ask questions that I would never think of asking and this helps in my understanding of the grammar of Arabic."

#### *Class Management and Students' Participation*

As for class management, both groups agree that teachers involve students equally: 91% of the heritage and 91% of the non-heritage indicated that professors called equally on both student types. Also, 71% of HLLs disagree that the teacher involved non-HLLs more than HLLs. As for professors' expectations, 52% of non-HLLs and 44% of HLLs disagree that heritage speakers of Arabic in the class affects professors' expectations in terms of material coverage and thoroughness.

#### *Assessment*

This study found that 61% of non-HLLs and 53% of HLLs disagree that there should be two different sets of standards in grading assignments. A student comments:

... as far as the grading system be corrected, it must be understood that although we are heritage speakers what I understand from this is that we have absorbed much of our culture and colloquial language only because we have been

exposed to it. But as far as I actually learn the language reading and speaking it fluently for that matter, we are very much at the same level as those non heritage students. Students are neutral about their grades.

HLLs are aware of, and sensitive to, the limitations of non-HLLs learning Arabic. As a result, 79% of HLLs disagree that they feel impatient sometimes when non-HLLs try to express their ideas in Arabic.

#### *Course Pace, Difficulty and Material Coverage*

In terms of course pace and difficulty, 77% of heritage students disagree that the pace of the course is slower due to the presence of non-heritage students. “A few of the non heritage students believe the course is too hard and fast because heritage students are present. Non heritage or heritage, Arabic isn’t the easiest subject, and without dedication, studying it makes it even harder.” said a heritage student. 74% of non-HLLs expressed as similar sentiment.

Also, 61% of non-HLLs disagree that the course would be faster without heritage learners, and, moreover, 74% disagree that it would be harder. As for presentation and content, non-heritage students are divided. 77% of HLLs disagree that the level of the course is less challenging because of the presence of the non-heritage students.

#### **T-Test Results**

To find out if there are any significant differences between heritage and non-heritage learners when compared in terms of the items that overlap between the two questionnaires, independent sample t-tests were used. Table 4 shows the t-tests results.

Table 4. Independent Sample T-Test for Equality of Means Results (HLLs and Non-HLLs)

Factor Name	T	Sig (2 tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.
Intimidation	0.64	0.52	0.19	0.29
Motivation	-5.36	0.00	-1.3	0.24
Working with Others 1.75	0.09	0.38	0.22	
Cultural Awareness	1.21	0.23	0.25	0.21
Professor's Expectations	-0.20	0.84	0.06	0.31
Separate Tracks	-0.42	0.68	-0.15	0.37
Grading Criteria	0.61	0.55	0.17	0.28
Calling on Students	9.37	0.00	2.36	0.25
Involvement of Students	-10.29	0.00	-2.3	0.22
Course Pace	-2.19	0.03	-0.57	0.27
Course Difficulty Level	-0.70	0.49	-0.16	0.22
Others' Contribution	1.54	0.13	0.32	0.21

The independent samples t-tests results show that there is a significant difference between the two groups at the level of  $p < 0.05$  in four factors. There is no significant difference in the motivation level between the two groups' perceptions of being mixed. Also, the difference is insignificant when it comes to professor's calling on students of either type equally, or involving heritage students more than non-heritage students. Finally, the two groups do not differ significantly in the course pace variable. Both feel that the pace would still be the same if they were to be separated. There was no significant difference in the remainder of the factors.

### **Discussion**

Research suggests that one of the drawbacks of mixing heritage and non-heritage students is the intimidation experienced by non-heritage students, especially when they want to speak. This is because of HLLs' familiarity with the language sound system and/or more advanced oral proficiency level (Kagan & Dillon, 2001; Mazzoco, 1996). Results of the current study suggest that the presence of HLLs in the classroom intimidates 9 non-HLLs students, and does not intimidate 12 students. While the intimidation can be justified for the former as previously shown, the lack of intimidation for the latter may be a result of the exposure these students may receive outside the classroom being friends or acquaintances with HLLs. Since 60-70% of the Arabic class population comes from an Arabic-speaking background, their presence in the university is salient, and they do not constitute a marginalized group. Such interaction may result in satisfactory learning experience as suggested by Li & Duff (2000). Secondly, lack of intimidation may be related to the fact that heritage students struggle with speaking and learning MSA, just as non-HLLs do, since it is not their mother tongue. MSA is a variety that most heritage students may not have learned or experienced and constitutes a common challenge for both groups alike. Valdes (2005) pointed out that there was a similar problem with Spanish heritage students who had difficulty learning grammar and textbook vocabulary, a result of the sociolinguistic situation of

diglossia. While it is true that some heritage students can speak Arabic, they are still on the same or similar level with non-heritage learners when it comes to MSA. Heritage students may feel intimidated too, because the emphasis is on MSA, which may create a conflict in student's confidence and motivation to learn and retain the language (S'hiri, 2004). Furthermore, non-HLLs may have come to the conclusion that this is the reality of the language classroom, and thus feeling intimidated and uncomfortable will not resolve any discrepancies or gaps in the language levels. Although the results are not certain, the suggestion of an impact warrants further study to provide more definitive conclusions.

Since many of HLLs come with a language background (18 always spoke Arabic at home, 14 spoke it sometimes, and only 4 did not speak it), non-HLLs may have felt or even found their presence beneficial, at least in the lower level classes. More exposure to the sound system and pronunciation is warranted. Although HLLs do not view much benefit in having non-HLLs present in their class, they do not see any harm. To HLLs, the presence of non-HL learners is part of the classroom setting. In fact they may have felt motivated, since they witnessed other students from other backgrounds learn their language, despite the negative stereotypes with which Arabic is associated.

It is interesting, however, and may seem contradictory, that non-HLLs think that the presence of HLLs impedes their learning. This is in agreement with what was proposed by Kagan & Dillon (2001). In this situation, it is assumed that HLLs with a higher level of proficiency in one of the dialects may feel more comfortable speaking their dialects, at least with each other, and even with non-HLLs. It is harder for them "to break the habit" as one student put it. To the latter, this proved to impede their learning. Non-HLLs do not have the same level of proficiency HLLs may have. Furthermore, they may feel embarrassed to speak in front of someone who spoke the language for some time, or even their whole life. Beyond the dialect issue, students may sense that the teacher is taking extra time to address the needs of two separate groups, or that HLLs are bored with the material or pace of the class. Finally, since the focus is on MSA, the teacher may be focused on correcting HLLs' errors that are

of a different nature as that of non-HLLs' errors, and encourage them to conform the rules of MSA.

As for involving either group more than the other, it is clear that the three teachers (at least in this institution) are aware that even unintentional bias towards either can be detrimental. The focus on heritage students will alienate non-heritage students and make them feel that they do not belong. On the other hand, focusing attention on non-heritage students will give heritage students the impression that the class is not designed to accommodate their needs.

As for the course pace, difficulty and material coverage, and with more than half of the student population being heritage, both groups had similar beliefs to a great extent. The majority believe that the pace, difficulty, and material coverage would not be different without heritage learners. As noted earlier, to many of these HLLs, MSA is a new subject with which they struggle, since they come from households where dialects may be spoken. Even if some have more advanced oral skills in their dialects, this may even hinder their language learning, since the focus of instruction in the classroom is to develop proficiency in MSA. Spoken dialects may interfere negatively in the learning process. It also seems that instructors may also have been aware of this yet did not assume that heritage learners knew about their lesson more than non-HLLs and thus both groups had similar beliefs.

Having two sets of assessment criteria in grading students' assignments was not an attractive idea. Students do not feel strongly about having two sets of assessments or criteria in grading assignments. One reason for this is that students did not witness any major difference in their grades factoring in their prior oral linguistic background. The assumption by some HLLs that enrolling in Arabic language course will guarantee a good grade is not founded. As one of their instructors, the researcher found that their overall grades had normal distributions. Outliers did exist, but that is the case in most language and non-language classes.

As for having separate classes, post-secondary institutions tend to separate HL and non-HL learners into two separate tracks when possible. First, it is assumed that HL learners have more advanced linguistic skills. Secondly, HL learners are assumed to be able to learn the target language at a more accelerated pace (Kondo,



2005). Placement tests have been created to identify HLLs who have advanced language skills (Xiao, 2006). Nonetheless, Kondo suggested that most of these tests are descriptive, and research investigating the effectiveness and appropriateness of these tests is minimal. In a study of Japanese Heritage and Foreign Language learners, Kondo (2005) found striking similarities in language use and skills among the two groups. Moreover, separate tracks usually exist at lower language levels and emphasize literacy skills. According to Ke (1998), the creation of separate tracks is based on an uninvestigated assumption, namely, that HLLs learn literacy skills quickly and their skills will match those of non-HL learners in a short period of time. This assumption needs to be validated through empirical data (Ke, 1998; Kondo, 2005). Mazzocco (1996) maintained that heritage learners come with a linguistic and cultural wealth that should not be neglected. Valuing the cultural resources of the HLLs will increase their self-esteem and will make them appreciate their skills. According to Scalera (2004):

recognizing what students know, asking for their contributions and support, help everyone. As teachers, we can learn more about the language and culture we are teaching, other students will learn to have respect for an actual speaker of the language, and heritage speakers will feel recognized and supported for the cultural knowledge and linguistic skills they bring to the class (p.3-4).

However, not all heritage learners are culturally well-versed. In fact, some may be unaware of the basic facts about their culture. The fact that some may know about the food and clothing items does not make them rich cultural resources. In this study, the fact that slightly over half (65%) of HLLs feel mixing is beneficial and that 52% of non-HLLs feel the presence of HLLs with advanced language skills impedes their instruction may indicate that that either group does not feel strongly about mixing or separation as a necessity and that they could adjust to either situation.

## Conclusion and Implications

The current study examined the students' inter and intra-group beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions in combined Arabic classrooms. Although the focus of the study was the students of Arabic, its implications may be relevant to other Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs), languages where heritage and non-heritage language learners are combined and taught in the same language setting. The study showed that as there are disadvantages to combined Arabic classes, there are also benefits. On the one hand, HLLs start to appreciate their heritage skills and thus increase their self-confidence. They also learn from the input non-HLLs may bring to the classroom as foreign language learners. On the other hand, non-HLLs will be exposed to native or near native pronunciation and speech, will experience a type of immersion environment (at least in lower level classes), and will acquire cultural knowledge (when and if available). The study showed that Arabic combined classrooms are peculiar and are different from other languages in that the focus is on MSA. HLLs and non-HLLs learn the same language and thus both may struggle, and feel intimidated.

The study showed that students are divided on the issue of separation, and it seems that the diglossic situation plays a big role in students' perceptions of separation. While non-HLLs may believe that they should be separated from HLLs due to their assumed advanced language proficiency, particularly in listening and speaking, HLLs may not feel the same as their proficiency in MSA is basic, and therefore should take beginning classes with non-HLLs. Secondly, since heritage students are numerous on this campus, they may have a strong connection with non-heritage learners and thus would welcome having them in the same classes.

The results of the current study may alleviate some of the educators' concerns about combined Arabic classes, and all languages in which there is a balanced population of HLLs and Non-HLLs (which are essentially all LCTLs), as HLLs come to the classroom with similar linguistic backgrounds. However, research may not solve all the issues discussed in this study completely, since part of the problem can be related to students' needs, expertise in heritage language development, budgets or the availability of infrastructures

required to meet each group's needs. Also, until educators agree on the best way to teach combined classes, teachers will need to develop and pilot materials based on the existing research findings and best teaching practices. They will also need to educate themselves on the principles of heritage language education. Differentiating instruction to some extent to suite each group can be implemented to resolve the problem even partly and temporarily. However, differentiating instruction requires performing background assessment, differentiating content, and means of evaluation.

As the role of instructors is instrumental in combined language classes, one implication of the study is that teachers can create a more engaging environment in a combined language classroom setting by using the "situated learning" model. Through this model, learning becomes a process of engagement that creates a "community of practice," where learning becomes a social activity rather than an individualistic task (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wegner, 2000). In so doing, HLLs and non-HLLs will interact regularly regarding a passion or a concern they both share.

However, as Arabic curricula design witnesses a major shift where dialects are being integrated, the dynamics of the combined classroom will inevitably change. While HLLs may not shy away from using their dialects in the classes anymore, non-HLLs may find HLLs' presence more useful to their learning as they are learning a variety their classmates use. They may also feel intimidated due to their peers' higher oral proficiency. Furthermore, the fact that Arabic dialects vary lexically, morphologically, syntactically, and phonologically, HLLs who have a language background in a different dialect from the one being taught or that their peers may use will find themselves at a disadvantage. Arabic educators and practitioners will find a different dilemma to address.

### **Limitations of the Study and Future Research**

This study surveyed students' beliefs and feelings in combined Arabic classes in only one institution where the rate of HLLs in language classrooms is high. Results may not be generalizable to other combined classes of Arabic. Future research should examine beliefs of students who experienced both separated and mixed language classes. Research will also need to focus on the learners' needs so that instruction can be differentiated to suit the needs of each group independently.

In the setting where the study was conducted, non-heritage learners may have had a bias and thus skewed responses due to their exposure to heritage students and Arab culture. Studies in other areas where the same rate of exposure does not take place are also needed. Since the conclusions of the study are based on students' beliefs and perceptions, heritage and non-heritage teachers' perspectives and attitudes towards HLLs and their language varieties in speaking and writing as well need to be researched to validate such conclusions.

### References

- Bale, J. (2010). Arabic as a heritage language in the United States. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 4(2), 125-151.
- Cho, G. (2000). The role of heritage language in social interactions and relationships: Reflections from a language minority group. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 24(4), 369-384.
- Cho, G., Krashen, K., & Shin, F. (2004). What do we know about heritage languages? What do we need to know about them? *Multicultural Education*, 11(4), 23-26.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2000). Motivation in action: Towards a process-oriented conceptualization of Student Motivation. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 70, 519-538.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Kormos, J. (2000). The role of individual and social variables in oral task performance. *Language Teaching Research* 4(3), 275-300.
- Cummins, J. (2005). A proposal for action: Strategies for recognizing heritage language competence as a learning resource within the mainstream classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89, 585-592.
- Gordon, L. (2006). Interest in learning Arabic soars: As global events focus on the language, students at U.S. colleges are lining up for classes, but instructors are in short supply. Retrieved April 15, 2011 from <http://ktla.trb.com/news/ktla-arabic,0,7426016,print.story?coll=ktla-news-1>
- Ibrahim, Z., & Allam, J. (2006). Arabic learners and heritage students redefined: Present and future. In K. Wahba, Z. Taha & L. England (Eds.), *Handbook for Arabic language teaching professionals in the 21st Century* (pp. 437-446). NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Fisherman, J. (2001). 300-plus years of heritage language education in the United States. In K. Peyton, D. Ranard, & S. McGinnis (Eds.) *Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource Language in Education: Theory and Practice*. (pp. 87-97). McHenry, IL & Washington, D.C.: Delta Publishing Company and Center for Applied Linguistics.
- McGinnis, S. (2005). More than a silver bullet: The role of Chinese as a heritage language in the United States. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89, 592-594.
- Modern Language Association (2009). Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education.
- Kagan, A. and Dillon, K. (2001). A New perspective on teaching Russian: Focus on the heritage learner. *The Slavic and East European Languages*, 45(3), 507-518.
- Ke, C. (1998). Effects of language background on the learning of Chinese characters among foreign language learners. *Foreign Language Annals*, 31, 91-100.
- Kondo-Brown, K. (2005). Heritage language instruction for post-secondary students from immigrant backgrounds. Retrieved on March 1, 2011 from [http://www.international.ucla.edu/cms/files/kondo\\_brown.pdf](http://www.international.ucla.edu/cms/files/kondo_brown.pdf)
- Kondo-Brown, K (2005). Differences in language skills: Heritage language learner subgroups and foreign language learners. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89, 563-581.
- Kono, N. and McGinnis, S. (2001). Heritage languages and higher education: Challenges, issues, and needs. In K. Peyton, D. Ranard, & S. McGinnis (Eds.) *Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource Language in Education: Theory and Practice*. (pp. 197-207). McHenry, IL & Washington, D.C.:

Delta Publishing Company and Center for Applied Linguistics.

- Lave, J. and E. Wenger (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Mazzocco, E. (1996). The heritage versus the non-heritage language learner: The five college self-instructional language program's solutions to the problem of separation or unification. *ADFL Bulletin*, 28, (1), 20-23.
- Ryding, K. C. (2006). Teaching Arabic in the United States. In K. M. Wahba, Z. A. Taha, & L. England (Eds.) *Handbook for Arabic language teaching professionals in the 21st century* (pp. 13-20). London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Scalera, D. (2003). The invisible learner: Unlocking the heritage language treasure. *Language Association Journal*, 55(2).
- Scalera, D. (Producer). (2002). *I Speak Arabic*. [Documentary videotape]. (Available from Diana Scalera, 285 Avenue C, 1E, New York, New York, 10009)
- S'hiri, S. (2004). Review of the film *I Speak Arabic: The Immigrant Experience in American Schools through the Eyes of Arabic Speakers*. UCLA Center for World Languages. Retrieved on March 15 from <http://www.international.ucla.edu/cms/files/shiri.pdf>
- Valdes, G. (2005). Bilingualism, heritage language learners, and SLA research: Opportunities lost or seized? *The Modern Language Journal*, 89, 410-426.
- Wagner, J. (2005). Intelligence community's Arabic challenge: Lack of language skills seen as a major pitfall of U.S. war on terror. Retrieved on March 15 from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6275410/print/1/displaymode/1098/>

- Weger-Guntharp, H. (2006). Voices from the margin: Developing a profile of Chinese heritage language learners in the FL classroom. *Heritage Language Journal*, 4(1), 29–46.
- Wenger, E. (2000). *Communities of Practice*. New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Xiao, Y. (2006). Heritage learners in the Chinese language classroom: Home background. *Heritage Language Journal*, 4(1), 47–57.



## Appendix 1

### Open Ended Questions Heritage Language Learners Participants

1. Are there any statements on the written questionnaire that you want to respond to in more detail? If so, what is your opinion about those statements?
2. Describe the interactions you have observed between heritage and non-heritage students in your Arabic course.
3. Do you see any advantages to mixing together non-heritage, and heritage students in Arabic courses? Any disadvantages?
4. Would you rather study with only heritage speakers? Why or why not?
5. What do professors do that is helpful/not helpful to you as a heritage speaker?
6. Have your feelings about the mixing of heritage and non-heritage students changed during your years at the university (or respective institution)?
7. What advice do you have for other heritage students in your upper-level Arabic courses? Do you have any advice for non-heritage speakers in your upper-level courses?
8. What, if anything, do you want your professors to know about your situation as a heritage speaker in the language courses? What, if anything, do you want your non-heritage speaking peers to know?

## Appendix 2

### Open Ended Questions Non-Heritage Language Learners Participants

1. Are there any statements on the written questionnaire that you want to respond to in more detail? If so, what is your opinion about those statements?
2. Describe what it feels like to be a non-native Arabic speaker in Arabic courses at your institution. How would you describe the interactions you have observed between heritage and non-native students in Arabic courses?
3. Do you see any advantages of studying with a large number of heritage speakers? Any disadvantages?
4. Would you rather study in a class that does not have non-heritage population? Why or why not?
5. What do professors do that is helpful/not helpful to you as a non-heritage speaker? What would you like professors to do?
6. Have your feelings as a non-heritage Arabic speaker changed during your university language experience?
7. What advice do you have for other non-heritage speakers who are just starting to take Arabic courses? Do you have any advice for your heritage/native-speaking peers?
8. What do you want your professors to know about your situation? What do you want your heritage language peers to know?
9. Have you studied another language with heritage students in class? How was it compared to this class?