

# Heritage Motivation, Identity, and the Desire to Learn Arabic in U.S. Early Adolescents

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## Abstract

Arabic language learning has received considerable attention in recent years due to its status as a critical language, a heritage language, and a less-commonly taught language and its linguistic and sociopolitical complexity (Al-Batal, 2007; Wiley, 2007). Though the number of learners in the U.S. has increased dramatically since 2001 (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2007), much remains to be learned about learners' various needs and desires and the role of family support, particularly for younger learners. This paper draws on findings from surveys and interviews conducted at a U.S. public school with students in grades 6-8 and their parents. Results elaborate the motivations that students from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds and their families bring to the learning experience. In particular, this paper defines *heritage learners* (HLLs), *foreign language learners* (FLLs), and *religious heritage learners* (RHLs) in this population and suggests implications for teaching these and other comparable learner populations.

## Review of Literature

Language learning trends in the United States tend to be sensitive to social and political processes in the world at large as well as patterns of immigration and globalization (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003). At this particular sociohistorical moment, Arabic is one of the most desired foreign languages in the U.S., both as a *critical language* (a language valued at the government level for the purposes of international relations and security) and as a *heritage language* (a language valued for its real and symbolic connections to family members and communities who speak it) (Allen, 2007; Wiley, 2007). In addition to their importance for family communication and cultural maintenance and transmission, languages such as Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic are

global languages with high relevance for the future of international relations (Blake & Kramersch, 2007). While Arabic and Chinese are usually classified as less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) because they fall outside the handful of languages including Spanish, German, and French that are popular in U.S. schools, these languages are beginning to stretch the “less common” definition. Nearly 24,000 learners were enrolled in almost 500 university Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) programs around the country at last count (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2007) and another 50,000 students were studying AFL in private and public schools from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Greer & Johnson, 2009). Nevertheless, little research has been conducted to help learners, families, teachers, program administrators, government policy makers, and other stakeholders understand what motivates these learners, how the process of acquiring Arabic may be similar to or different from other languages, and what pedagogical approaches might best meet the needs recognized by these learners, their families and their teachers while also addressing needs expressed by the U.S. policy makers who have funneled funds into programs offering AFL (Allen, 2007; Blake & Kramersch, 2007).

### **Identifying Heritage Language Learners**

The term *heritage language learner* (HLL) has been defined in various ways, few of which fully encompass the range of differences among them and the importance of the languages they speak. One widely-cited definition states that the heritage learner is one who is “raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or at least understands the language, and who is to some degree bilingual in that language and in English” (Valdés, 2001, p. 38). Van Deusen-Scholl (2003) emphasizes, however, as does Valdés (2001) later in the same piece, that determining who is and is not a HLL depends more on the learner’s orientation to his or her ethnic heritage than on proficiency: “heritage language learners comprise a heterogeneous group ranging from fluent native speakers to non-speakers who may be generations removed but who may feel culturally connected to a language” (p. 221).

The identification of heritage learners complicates foreign language instruction for many LCTLs. While heritage learners of

Spanish have received the most attention in this country, learners of Korean, Chinese, and Japanese are among the most widely-researched LCTL populations (He, 2010; Kondo-Brown, 2010; Valdés, 2001). Like these languages, Arabic is challenging not only because it confronts English-dominant learners with a new orthography, a lexicon with few English cognates, and an unfamiliar morphological and syntactic system, but also because, as with other LCTLs, challenges include the dearth of appropriate materials and qualified teachers. In addition, Arabic also presents the problem of diglossia, which separates the dialects<sup>1</sup> that are spoken in Arab countries and in Arab-American homes from Modern Standard Arabic or *fusHa* (الفسحي), the formal dialect associated with literacy and higher education across the Arab world and typically taught in school-based AFL programs (Al-Batal, 2007; Husseinali, 2006). Thus Arabic HLLs may be difficult to identify and their needs difficult to address for two main reasons: first, Arabic as a linguistic designation encompasses not only the distinct forms used for literacy and for speaking, but also to a plurality of spoken varieties that may be mutually unintelligible from one end of the Arab world to the other (and among HLLs in one classroom); and second, Arab and non-Arab Muslims place a high value on the language in their religious practice. These features complicate the interpretation and influence of “heritage” in ways that are largely unique to Arabic, though there are parallels in other languages and language communities.

### Motivation in Heritage Language Learners

In programs that serve learners from different language backgrounds, educators need to understand the patterns of self-identification, proficiency, and motivation that tend to be evident among heritage learners of a given target language (Kondo-Brown, 2010; Valdés, 2001). One of the most prominent concepts for analyzing FLLs’ motivation is Gardner and Lambert’s dichotomy of *instrumental* motivations, relating to pragmatic goals such as grades and career, and *integrative* motivations, relating to positive attitudes toward

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<sup>1</sup> The terms dialect and variety are treated as synonymous for the purposes of this analysis. Both refer to differences in pronunciation, lexicon, and grammar used in different communities of Arabic speakers.

and desire to interact with speakers of the target language (Dörnyei, 2003). Another is Ryan and Deci's (2000) *self-determination theory*, which states that learners can be *extrinsically* motivated by factors external to the language itself such as academic achievement or others' desires or *intrinsically* motivated by enjoyment of the language learning process. Noels (2005) brought these constructs together to analyze the motivation of heritage learners of German in Canada and concluded that HLLs and non-HLLs were quite similar except that HLLs related language learning to a sub-category of extrinsic motivation, *identified regulation*, that ties language learning to the construction of a satisfactory identity. Although much work on motivation now stresses the dynamic nature of motivation and the influence of contextual factors (Dörnyei, 2003; Dörnyei, 1994; Gardner, 2006), the current study, like Noels (2005), focuses on motivation in terms of the initial desire to learn Arabic.

For heritage learners, motivation may be significantly impacted by processes of identity construction (He, 2010; Noels, 2005); attitudes toward their own languages and expectations about future use (Mucherah, 2008); and desire to maintain relationships with family members who speak the HL and to develop relationships with other members of that language community (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001). In turn, parents' desire for their children to learn a given language varies depending on the parent's language background and language attitudes, though for many parents language maintenance is a challenge and a responsibility that they feel strongly about and that impacts their own identity (Mills, 2004; Schüpbach, 2009). Sehlaoui (2008) has explained that Arabic-speaking families often rely on weekend schools or private academies to teach Arabic to children, as do families who speak Chinese and Korean.

At the same time, parents who do not come from a bilingual or multilingual background may desire greater language proficiency for their children and seek out language-oriented schools, believing that bilingualism will confer cognitive and academic benefits on their offspring (King & Fogle, 2006). Although these foreign language learners (FLLs) have been studied extensively by applied linguists, the comparisons and interactions between HLLs and FLLs in instructional settings are less understood (Kondo-Brown, 2010; Montrul, 2010).

### Heritage Motivation in University Learners

A number of university-based studies have investigated the self-identification, instructional placement, and motivations of HLLs studying LCTLs. Lee (2005), drawing on survey data from learners studying several languages at one university, proposes a HLL continuum from the “Classic Non-HLL Prototype” with no proficiency and no ethnic affiliation to the “Classic HLL Prototype” which assumes some linguistic and cultural knowledge. In between, learners vary based on “degree of affiliation with ethnic, cultural, and/or religious identity; level of proficiency; experience in country or with culture” (p.561). As Lee (2005) found, learners of Arabic who do not come from Arabic-speaking families but have some prior knowledge of the language due to religious training, including many Urdu-speaking Pakistani students, self-identified as HLLs. These learners may have different sociopsychological needs from learners who have Arab ethnicity (He, 2010; Lee, 2005; Mills, 2004), but the nature of those differences remains an empirical question.

For the purposes of designing instructional approaches for HLLs and FLLs, Kondo-Brown (2005) prioritized the role of proficiency in her study of learners of Japanese. Using statistical analysis of standardized proficiency measures as well as student self-ratings of language preferences and abilities, Kondo-Brown contends that learners with a Japanese-speaking parent, most of whom in her population had lived in Japan or attended complementary schools and had some proficiency, should be tracked separately from learners with Japanese speakers only in their extended families, who could be combined with JFL learners with no family connection to the language.

In a study focusing on AFL learners, Husseinali (2006) assumed that “learners who are of Arab descent” and “non-Arab Muslims” could be “safely collapsed into one [group], due to the fact that students in both have cultural and historical ties to Arabic” as HLLs while learners from other backgrounds were considered non-HLLs (p. 396). In contrast to Kondo-Brown’s (2005) near-exclusive focus on proficiency, this study ignores proficiency completely while focusing on HLL and non-HLL motivational orientations. Husseinali

(2006) reports that in his population the two groups were similar in regard to motivations he considers “Travel and Culture Orientations” but differed in that non-HLLs rated “Instrumental Orientations,” such as hope of a better job and desire to better understand Middle East politics as more important, while HLLs more highly valued “Identification Orientations” including interest in Arabic literature, own culture, own Islamic heritage, Islam as a world religion, and using Arabic with Arabic-speaking friends.

Despite the potential usefulness of these motivational distinctions, the treatment of non-Arab Muslims as a population in Husseinali (2006) is questionable for multiple reasons. First, the process used to identify these learners is unclear in the article. Second, the author’s decision to combine them with students of Arab descent was not supported by empirical data. And third, this choice obscures differences in proficiency that may not affect answers on these motivational scales, but are likely to impact motivation and progress as the learning process continues (Dornyei, 2003; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995).

### **The Current Study**

The current study seeks to take both proficiency and motivation into account when analyzing the three potential groups of AFL learners: learners of Arabic descent, non-Arab Muslims, and learners with other language and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the current study focuses on younger learners of this challenging critical and heritage language, who may be affected very differently by their families’ desires and their instructional context than the university students in the studies above. Scholars in applied linguistics have long agreed that exposure to a second language by early adolescence contributes to higher levels of attainment than later onset (Nikolov & Djigunovic, 2006). In classroom settings, older learners may have superior language learning abilities as a result of metacognitive factors (Singleton, 2002). However, learners of foreign languages in adolescence may not have a clear sense of the benefits of language learning. In an English-dominant context, it may become increasingly difficult to encourage HLLs to value their ethnic and cultural ties and to put effort into language learning as they enter adolescence (Caldas, 2006).

Research on early adolescents who are encountering a language in school as a heritage or foreign language is still quite limited, particularly in regard to LCTLs. This study aims to address that lack through an investigation of one group of learners at a suburban charter school and their parents. The purpose of this analysis is to describe the characteristics of the student population attending this middle school and their parents in terms of language background and prior exposure to Arabic. Further, this analysis will describe student motivations to learn Arabic along with parents' values in regard to their children's language learning. In addition to informing the teachers, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders in the current school, the patterns evident in the population surveyed here may serve as a guide for investigations of similar programs that teach Arabic to adolescent learners and that offer other challenging LCTLs to heritage and non-heritage learners.

### **Methodology**

This paper draws on data from surveys, interviews, and classroom observations conducted with students and their parents. The current analysis focuses on data from surveys and initial interviews that elucidate the students' and parents' language backgrounds, their decisions to come to this school, and their motivation to learn Arabic or for their children to learn it.

### **Research Context**

Only about 15% of public U.S. elementary schools and 58% of all U.S. middle schools offer a foreign language; this school falls into the 1% of those schools that offer Arabic (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2010). Each weekday except Friday (when school lets out early, at least in part so that Muslim students can attend Friday services at their mosque), all students from kindergarten through eighth grade (K-8) receive a lesson that lasts up to 50 minutes. In the year when this data was collected, three full-time teachers and one part-time teacher taught all of these grade levels. All four teachers were native speakers of Arabic, born in four different Arab countries, who had each been certified in their knowledge of Modern Standard Arabic

through institutions in their home countries. Though these teachers had little prior experience teaching foreign languages in school settings (one had taught French and one had taught English as foreign languages) and none had taught Arabic except in private or religious contexts, the three full-time teachers have continued to seek training and credentials through organizations such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and STARTALK, a U.S. government-funded program for developing learners and teachers of LCTLs.

### Participants

The survey participants included 80 students in the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades and 36 parents from the same population. Since there are just under 100 students in the middle school, this group represents a high proportion of the students. The parents represent about a quarter of the families. The students are balanced for gender (41 male, 39 female), and the distribution of this sample across grade levels (30 in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 24 in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, 26 in 8<sup>th</sup> grade) reflects the total distribution. Ages range from 10 to 14. Classes are divided by gender as well as proficiency level. A summary of the six middle school Arabic classes appears in Table 1.

This study focuses on the middle schoolers (grades 6-8) in this population rather than all grades K-8 for multiple reasons. First, in these grades students are divided into three levels based on proficiency, whereas, in the elementary school grades, teachers deal with proficiency differences by differentiating within each class. These levels are referred to as Beginning, Intermediate<sup>2</sup>, and Advanced<sup>2</sup>, but as will be shown they essentially divide HLLs from non-HLLs. Second, literacy in Arabic plays a more prominent role in middle school instruction, as teachers make placement decisions based on literacy more than oral proficiency and as they strive to focus on literacy more heavily and explicitly across all three middle school levels than they do with younger children. Finally, as discussed above and as the teachers in this school have noted, the transition into adoles-

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<sup>2</sup> These are emic categories; they are not intended to correspond with external standards such as those developed by ACTFL.

cence often corresponds to a decrease in HLLs' motivation, and often that of FLLs as well.

After the surveys were conducted, the researcher approached a number of families who had indicated that they would be willing to participate in interviews. Of these, a sample was chosen to reflect the school population (Dornyei, 2007). At least one parent and one middle school child from seven families participated in ethnographic interviews. The interviewed families included two FLLs, one RHL, two HLLs with one Arabic-speaking parent, and two HLLs with two Arabic-speaking parents.

Table 1.  
*Summary of the Six Middle School Arabic Classes*

		N <sup>1</sup>	Ability at 1 <sup>st</sup> Survey	Approx ACTFL Level
Beginner	Girls Boys	21	None	Novice-Beginner
Intermediate	Girls Boys	23	Some reading/ writing Limited vocabulary	Novice-Mid
Advanced	Girls Boys	27	Full use of alphabet Varying MSA vocabulary	Novice-High to Intermediate-Mid

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## Procedure

**Questionnaires.** The data for this analysis were collected by means of two survey questionnaires, one for the students and one for the parents, at the beginning of the school year. Another survey was administered at the end of the school year; its results will be considered further in future analyses. The initial student questionnaire, which was administered in the school's equivalent of homeroom classes, consisted of 27 open-ended, multiple choice, and chart-based items covering biographical data, language knowledge and use, home language use and proficiency, and learning Arabic in school. This

\* <sup>1</sup> The total number of students in these 3 levels does not match the total surveyed population because several students are pulled out of Arabic to receive remedial help in reading or math. All but two of these are FLLs.

survey ended with a list of reasons for studying Arabic, of which the students could select as many as they wanted (see Appendix A).

The parent questionnaire was not designed to parallel the student questionnaire precisely, but covered similar topics including biographical data, language proficiency items (with space to describe multiple languages), family language use, and reasons for enrolling their children in this school. This survey also included nine items asking parents to rate statements about the value of language learning on a 5-point Likert scale from “Not important” to “Extremely important” (see Appendix B).

The surveys were designed with redundancies regarding certain topics, as Dornyei (2007) recommends, including whether participants were multilingual, which language was first and/or dominant, and whether they valued Arabic for religious purposes. Based on their responses, the participants were coded according to HL status:

- *heritage language learners* (HLLs) use Arabic with their families;
- *religious heritage learners* (RHLs) do not use Arabic for family communication but answered at least one of the items linking Arabic to religion positively; and
- *foreign language learners* (FLLs) are English monolingual or bilingual in a language other than Arabic and did not connect Arabic to religion.

Survey responses were analyzed primarily using descriptive statistics, with some support from Chi-square tests for categorical data. The total number of motivations selected by each student was treated as a new variable that approximates the strength or range of student motivations; this was compared across groups using ANOVA.

**Interviews.** For the interviews discussed here, the mother and the child (and in one case, also the father) met with the researcher together. These interviews covered a core set of topics including the family’s decision to send the children to this school, their language backgrounds and language learning experience, and their hopes and expectations for the children’s study of Arabic. The interviews were ethnographic in that the structure of the questions and the overall content varied depending on the participants’ responses and interests, and that the goal was to achieve an emic understanding of their relationship to Arabic language learning rather than a perfectly

comparable set of data regarding their background and choices (Mackey & Gass, 2005; Spradley, 1979).

These interviews were transcribed by the researcher using a transcription system that emphasizes content rather than fine-grained linguistic detail (Duff, 2008). The families who participated in interviews can (and in future analyses will) be considered as separate case studies. For the purposes of this analysis, the transcripts have been coded with a small set of *a priori* codes that were intended to identify similar topics to those covered by the surveys and to facilitate comparison of these different families and their varying concerns and preoccupations.

## Findings

### Language Background and Use

Although only about a quarter of families in this school use Arabic for communication at home, language learning and multilingualism are familiar to many parents and their children. Table 2 summarizes home language use among these students. The majority of the students ( $n = 45$ ) speak a language other than English with their parents, though only three were born outside the U.S. The students who do not were coded as monolinguals, but 23 monolinguals (66%) report that they have had exposure to at least one language other than English and Arabic, either in a previous school or a private setting. Five students have some proficiency in four or more languages. Despite the high proportion of children of immigrants in this population, only three students were receiving ESL (English as a Second Language) services of any kind through school at the time of data collection.

Table 2.  
*Summary of Languages that Students Use with Their Families*

Home Language	Speakers	%
Arabic	19	23.8
Urdu	12	15.0
Spanish	6	7.5
Tamil, Bengali, Persian	2 each	7.5
French, Igbo	1 each	2.5
English only	35	43.8

The majority of the parents who responded to the survey were born in other countries, and they are predominantly multilingual. In fact, multilingual parents seem to have chosen to complete the survey in disproportion to monolingual parents. Only six parent respondents appear to be monolingual in English. Nearly half of the parent respondents have some proficiency in Arabic.

Among the families who were interviewed, all the parents had either grown up with at least two languages or studied another language at some point. In the case of the RHL family, the parents grew up in India with four languages, and even in the one family in which both parents grew up in monolingual English-speaking homes, they have both studied and used Spanish fairly extensively.

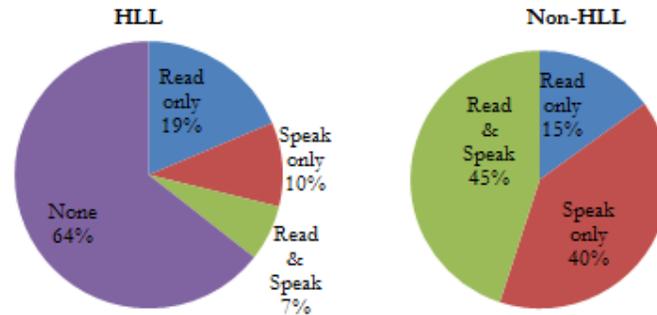
### Prior Exposure and Proficiency

As a whole, the student population includes similar numbers of learners who were complete novices in Arabic when they entered this school (48%) and learners who had some proficiency in one language skill or another (52%). The latter group was also evenly divided based on their skills: 14 (18% of total population) could read but not speak, 14 (18%) could speak but not read, and 13 (16%) could read and speak Arabic. Clearly this variation in the abilities students bring to school has implications for placement and instructional priorities, so it seems expedient to determine whether skill sets can be predicted from family background or vice versa.

If students are divided based only on the classic definitions of HLL and non-HLL as shown in Figure 1, the non-HLL group ap-

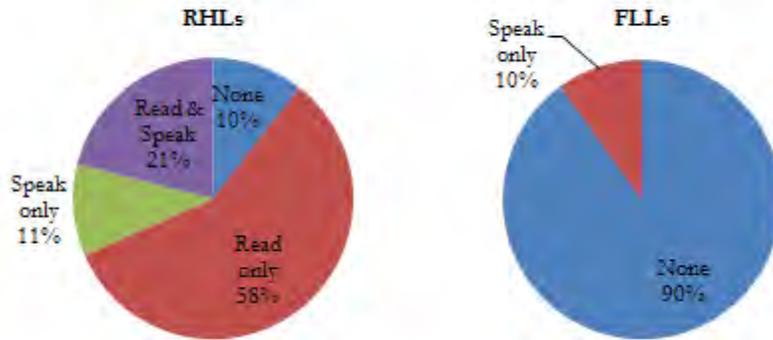
pears to vary widely, with nearly a third of these learners having prior exposure to Arabic.

**Figure 1.**  
*Comparison of Prior Knowledge in Students who Do and Do Not Speak Arabic at Home*



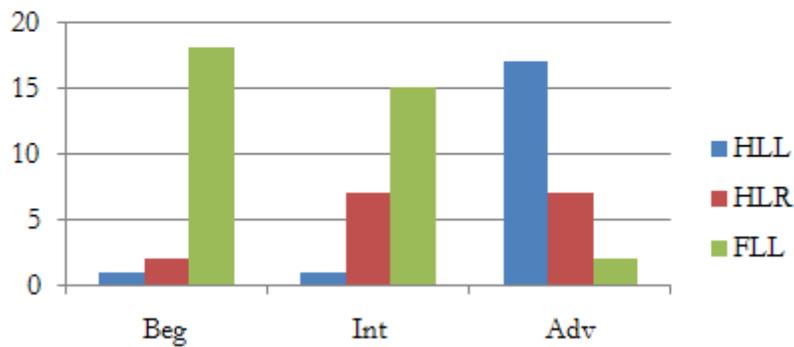
However, if non-HLLs are divided into RHLs and FLLs as in Figure 2, these two groups show highly divergent patterns of prior ability. The traditional HLL definition ignores distinctions between RHLs and FLLs that could help teachers predict students' proficiency and abilities. At the same time, the RHLs do not resemble the HLLs in their prior proficiency. In the RHL group, 90% had some proficiency in Arabic prior to studying it at this public school, but nevertheless they do not have exposure to communicative Arabic at home, as do traditional HLLs.

Figure 2.  
Comparison of Prior Knowledge in Religious Heritage Learners and Foreign Language Learners



As Figure 3 shows, these distinctions have clear implications for instructional levels, in that RHLs appear in the intermediate and advanced groups while FLLs predominate in the beginning and intermediate levels. The FLLs in the intermediate group have all been studying Arabic at this school for at least two years, while RHLs may be new to the school and go straight into the intermediate level. With very few exceptions, HLLs are immediately placed and remain in the advanced group.

Figure 3.  
Comparison of Three Instructional Levels Based on Student Heritage Background



While HLLs tend to have sufficient proficiency to participate in the advanced level class, their actual use and knowledge of Arabic may vary widely. As one HLL explained, when he entered this school “I couldn’t really read or write anything but like my dad always speaks with his friends in Arabic, so I could start to pick out words and understand them, and like understand kind of what they were talking about” (Interview, Zaki Family). On the other hand, the two HLL girls, whose parents both grew up speaking Arabic, speak their home dialect fluently and also read and write Arabic.

The RHL boy, like many others, reads and writes Arabic with relative ease thanks to years of private tutoring and evening or weekend lessons through his mosque. He manages the intermediate level class easily, and has a strong sense of his own ability:

I think at four I used to go to Qur’an class because I’m Muslim, so I read Qur’an, Qur’an is in Arabic... So I didn’t know the meaning, but I learned to read very well, I knew the alphabet very well... (Interview, Rangan Family)

When he states that he could read, however, he means that he could decode the text and pronounce words accurately, not that he could comprehend what he was reading. This ability nevertheless constitutes a significant advantage over the FLL students, both of whom clearly remember when, after years of instruction in school, Arabic “kinda stopped looking like scribbles and started looking like something meaningful” (Interview, Kimball Family).

### **Correlation with motivational factors**

**Parents.** Because this is a charter school, all of the families in this study made a conscious decision, and in many cases tremendous efforts, to make it possible for their children to attend this school. One of the interviewed families was involved in the founding of the school, and the others all clearly articulated the reasons for their choice. The following table summarizes descriptive statistics regarding the surveyed parents’ language backgrounds and their choice to bring their children to this school.

Table 3  
Descriptive Statistics on Parent Background and Reason for School Enrollment

	Total		Philosophy of School		Foreign Language		Arabic Language	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Speakers of Arabic	17		13	88.2 <sup>2</sup>	12	70.6	13	88.2
Non-speakers of Arabic	24		19	79.2	6	25.0	6	25.0
Multilingual	35		28	80.0	15	42.9	21	60.0
Monolingual	6		6	100.0	3	50.0	0	0.0
Arabic matters for religion	11		24	80.0	13	43.3	20	66.7
Arabic does not matter for religion	30		10	90.9%	5	45.5%	1	9.1

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Speakers of Arabic, multilingual parents, and those who say Arabic matters for religion value the Arabic program much more highly than their counterparts, while the majority of parents in all categories value the general philosophy of the school, which also includes integrated subjects and hands-on learning in relatively small classes. The FLL parents explained that Arabic was “interesting, but it wouldn’t have been my reason for sending [them] there. It was kind of like a – added bonus” (Interview, Kimball Family). For them, the general benefits of exposure to a foreign language were valuable, even if Arabic itself was not: “the fact that they even offered a second language education, you know, that was appealing” because it might support later language learning (Interview, Forden Family).

Although all the Arabic-speaking parents value Arabic, the Arabic program itself may not have been the deciding factor: “I didn’t choose [this school] for the language, as much it is for – the ambience of it... Because the language, I was able to give it to them” (Interview, Mudeer Family). Although she did not (despite prompting) clarify the meaning of “ambience,” the anecdotes both mothers told around this topic suggest that they were looking for a more culturally tolerant environment for their daughters, both of whom were in *hijab* (wearing traditional headscarves) like their mothers by the time of this study.

\* <sup>2</sup> Percentages are relative to the total number of parents who fall into each category, and parents of two children are counted twice.

When asked to rate specific reasons for studying Arabic, the parents' responses revealed patterns relating to their use of Arabic (or not) for family communication and religion. This list of statements includes 5 items that are phrased for language learning in general and four items that are geared toward Arabic specifically. Table 4 compares their responses based on their children's heritage status.

**Table 4**  
*Comparison of Parent Ratings of Motivations for Children to Learn Arabic by Heritage Status*

Reasons for studying Arabic	Mean Ratings		
	HLL	RHL	FLL
Language learning improves <i>mind</i>	4.9	4.9	4.4
Language learning expands <i>communication</i>	5.0	4.9	4.4
Language learning helps understand <i>cultures</i>	4.8	4.9	4.4
Language will help with <i>college</i>	4.5	3.6	3.8
Language will help to get a good <i>job</i>	4.9	3.6	4.0
<b><i>Mean of language learning items</i></b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>4.2</b>
Arabic will help communicate with <i>extended family</i>	4.6	2.4	1.8
Arabic will help <i>travel</i> to Middle East	4.4	4.3	1.7
Arabic will allow participation in <i>religion</i>	4.8	5.0	1.0
Arabic will allow access to <i>Arabic media</i>	4.8	3.8	2.5
<b><i>Mean of Arabic items</i></b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>3.9</b>	<b>1.8</b>

The ratings were fairly similar across groups for the general language learning items. The differences were much more drastic for the Arabic-specific items. HLL parents valued these reasons; RHL parents valued some of them, but communication with extended family is not a motivator for them; and the FLLs rated few items above a 2 (with 1 signifying "Not important").

Notably, every HLL and RHL parent except one rated "Knowing Arabic will allow my child to participate in our religious activities" as a 5 ("Very important"). This value has complex implications for a school-based program that must maintain the separation of church and state. While religious values are a powerful motivator for these parents, the school program focuses on secular uses for the language and excludes phrases referring to God (Allah) that are frequent in Arabic discourse such as *inshallah* ("God willing," ان شاء الله)

and *alhamdulillah* (“Praise God,” الحمد الله). One mother developed a passion for learning Arabic, her third language, when she became Muslim; she believes that the language itself “makes you think about God all the time... so Arabic, for people who take it from religious point of view is very different from the people who don’t take it from a religious point of view” (Interview, Hamid Family).

Another mother, who was raised in Egypt and is striving to ensure that her daughters reach a high level of proficiency in Arabic while living in the U.S., points to the complexity of learning Arabic, with its differing dialects: “And this is why we have a struggle with our children. It’s not that we’re supposed to teach them just the Arabic. We need to teach them *two* kinds of Arabic.” One is classical Qur’anic Arabic, “to keep your religion,” and the other is the spoken form “to communicate with family” (Interview, Basri Family). HLL parents value communication with extended family, travel, religion, and media, but of these purposes only formal news media uses the variety of Arabic that is actually taught in school.

As for RHL families, they feel the same obligation in terms of classical Arabic, and they have to make decisions based on limited time and resources and opportunity cost when they seek to balance the importance of Arabic with their own family heritage languages. In the Rangan family’s case, they have made some efforts to expose their children to Tamil, including putting them in a Tamil-medium school during a two-year sojourn in India, but in the U.S. their children study Arabic in and out of school while their development in Tamil oral proficiency and literacy lapses.

In contrast, the FLL families never speak in terms of imperatives about their children’s learning of any language, including Arabic. They have high hopes for their children as well, and their faith may also influence these goals, but they do not convey a sense of impending loss when they speak of the possibility that their children would not learn it. One FLL mother, a committed Christian, believes that if her children succeed in learning Arabic God “may raise them to be you know workers in the Middle East or people who work in politics and international relations, that would be lovely” (Interview, Forden Family). However, this desire is expressed as a hope, a possibility, whereas the HLL mothers see Arabic learning as a powerful obligation.

**Students.** The students' responses to the motivation items on their questionnaires showed similar patterns to those of their parents. The following table shows the number of students who selected each motivation and lists them in order of popularity.

Table 5.  
*Percentages of All Students Selecting Language Learning Motivations*

Motivation	All Students	
	N	%
<i>What are the reasons you are studying Arabic in school?</i>		
It's required by my school (SchReq)	57	71.3
My parents want me to learn it (Parents)	36	45.0
I enjoy learning languages (Enjoy)	35	43.8
My religion tells me that I should know it (Relig)	22	27.5
It will help me get into a good college (College)	22	27.5
I want to travel to an Arabic-speaking country (Travel)	19	23.8
It will help me get a good job (Job)	17	21.3
It will help me communicate with my relatives (ExtFam)	14	17.5
I want to speak to native speakers of Arabic (SpeakNS)	10	12.5
I want to understand Arabic on TV or Internet (Media)	9	11.3

In several cases, a motivation might seem to apply to a larger number of students than those who chose to select it; Arabic is required for all students, except those who are taken out for remediation in reading and math, and higher percentages are Muslim and have Arabic speakers in their extended families than are seen here. The lower motivation percentages may suggest that, while these purposes may be important for Arabic proficiency in general, the HLLs and RHLs do not necessarily associate studying Arabic in school with these purposes. Meanwhile, many of the students revealed signs of non-motivation, refusing to select any motivations ( $n = 4$ ) or checking only "It's required by my school" ( $n = 12$ ).

In order to determine whether the range of motivations differed among HLL, RHL, and FLL groups, one-way ANOVA was used to compare the number of motivations selected. The ANOVA

showed a significant effect for heritage group ( $F(2,77 \text{ d.f.}) = 8.721, p < .001$ ). A Tukey post hoc test showed that the HLLs (mean = 4.18) and FLLs (mean = 2.18) were significantly different, but the RHLs did not differ from either of these groups. However, the difference between RHLs and FLLs was very close to significance, at  $p = .057$ . Because these groups may be conflated by traditional definitions of heritage learner, this difference is particularly important.

**Table 6.**  
*Summary of One-Way ANOVA Results for Heritage Status and Number of Motivations Selected*

	HLL	RHL	FLL	Total
Mean	4.18	3.44	2.18	3.01
Standard deviation	2.24	1.85	1.66	2.05
N	22	18	40	80

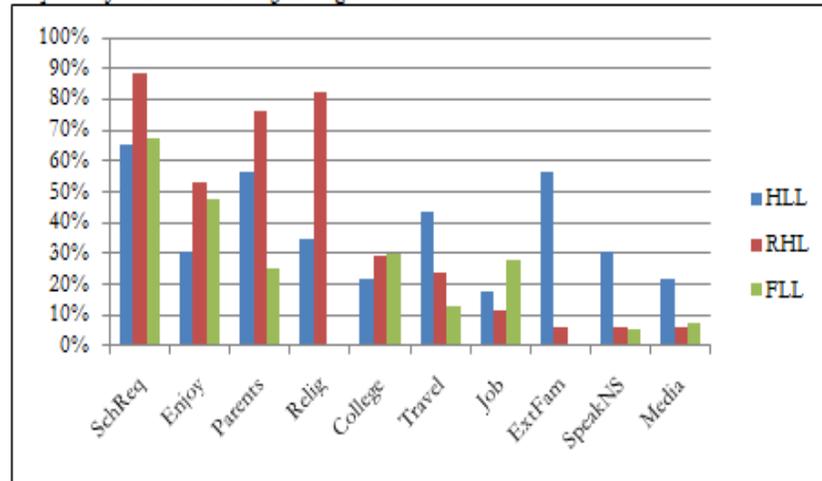
Source	SS	df	MS	F
Between	61.495	2	30.748	8.721*
Within	271.492	77	3.526	
Total	332.987	79		

\* $p < .001$

The FLLs equaled or exceeded the other two groups only in the two instrumental motivations, college and job. Only 25% state that they are learning Arabic because their parents want them to, which suggests that they have limited family support for this school subject, and many FLLs stated on the survey that they would rather be studying a different language. In general, RHLs seem to have much higher levels of parent support than FLLs. They are more concerned with the school requirement, enjoyment, their parents, and religion, and less concerned about future jobs than either of the other two groups. HLLs listed a wider variety of motivations, which may also be the reason why they chose school requirement and enjoyment less often than other learners; they seem to be less dependent on

these factors. The 2x3 Chi-square analysis showed that differences in regard to parents ( $\chi^2(2, 80) = 16.03, p < .001$ ) and religion ( $\chi^2(2, 80) = 38.87, p < .001$ ) were highly significant.

Figure 4.  
Comparison of Student Motivations by Heritage Status



Whereas the interviewed parents differed widely in the reasons they described for learning Arabic, the children readily mention college and career opportunities, no matter what their background. Both HLL and FLL children mentioned working as translators as possible outcomes for their Arabic studies, though they seem unaware of other professional uses for the language. On the other hand, the RHL student did not mention college or job opportunities as motivations, but he did immediately list the motivations most frequently selected by RHLs. He goes on to elaborate on the value of studying Arabic as a communicative language, which is an important goal in the public school program, but he connects it to religion:

Well, it's required by the school... And my parents want me to learn it. Because it's like – it has to do with the Qur'an... they have translation books, but if you really wanna – like just get it like looking at a normal book without translation, it'll be better to know Arabic, like to speak it. (Interview, Rangan Family)

As might be expected, it was more difficult for the FLLs to explain why they want to learn the language. The interviewed FLLs are among the most successful FLL learners in this population, which may be attributable to their parents' efforts to help them by sharing study strategies (e.g., practicing with flash cards together) and through explicit encouragement. Other FLL parents, according to their children, actively discourage them from putting effort into a school subject that they view as useless. Nevertheless, one of the interviewed FLLs, who is often held up as an example of the achievement that is possible for FLLs if they are in the program for a long period of time and continue to make efforts to learn, shows the clearest evidence of truly intrinsic motivation of any of the interviewed students. She stated that Arabic "fascinates" her and explained why:

Probably the – like the big differences. Between different languages... they sound different and they look different and they are different and it's written differently, and I find that interesting. Because – you know, it's something I haven't learned before... I kinda like the Arabic because ... not a lot of people outside [my school] know what Arabic even is. So I think that's cool. (Interview, Kimball Family)

In her case, learning Arabic makes her unusual both inside the school, where she is the only FLL in her advanced class, and outside her school, where studying this LCTL is exceptional and "cool." She may not be sure that she will be able to use Arabic in her future, or even if she will be able to continue studying it in high school, but for the time being the learning process itself pleases her.

### Discussion

Based on these findings, we can see that the learners of Arabic (MSA) in grades 6-8 at this public charter school can and should be divided into three distinct groups: heritage language learners (HLLs), religious heritage learners (RHLs), and foreign language learners (FLLs). Table 7 summarizes the differences among these groups of students and parents.

Table 7.  
*Summary Table Comparing Characteristics of Heritage Status Groups*

Predominant Characteristics	HLL	RHL	FLL
Family language background	At least one parent speaks Arabic fluently; family may or may not use Arabic for religious purposes	One or both parents uses Arabic for religious purposes; family usually has another HL (e.g., Urdu, Tamil)	Neither parent speaks Arabic or uses it for religious purposes; family may be monolingual (English) or use another HL
Exposure to Arabic outside public school	Communication with parents and other relatives; media including TV and books; often tutors and religious school as well as religious practices	Tutors and religious school as well as religious practices	Little or none
Prior proficiency in Arabic	100% some proficiency; 45% could read and speak; 60% could read	90% some proficiency; majority could read but not speak	Little or none
Student reasons for learning	Highest motivations (over 40% selected) were <i>school requirement, parents, extended family, and travel; enjoyment</i> lower than HLRs or FLLs	Highest motivations were <i>school requirement, enjoyment, parents, and religion</i> (all higher than HLLs)	Highest motivations were <i>school requirement and enjoyment</i> , everything else 30% or less. Ratings for <i>college and job</i> higher than HLLs or HLRs
Parent reasons for choosing this school	School philosophy, FL program, and Arabic <u>specifically</u> ; cultural tolerance also seems relevant	School philosophy and Arabic program more than FL in general; rely on school for Arabic more than HLLs	100% school philosophy; less than half FL program; almost none influenced by Arabic
Parent reasons for child Arabic acquisition	All reasons rated 4.4 or higher on average; general FL benefits and Arabic-specific benefits similar in value; communication with extended family only 4.6, perhaps due to <u>diglossia</u>	All said religion was extremely important; lower than HLLs on value for job and college; only communication with extended family averaged below 3.6 (at 2.4)	Rated general FL benefits at average of 3.8-4.4; Arabic-specific benefits much less valuable; may discourage kids from focusing on Arabic

Each of these groups brings different levels of proficiency, prior exposure, and motivations to the learning experience. While it may seem convenient to assume that HLLs are relatively proficient and motivated, FLLs are unfamiliar with the language and relatively unmotivated, and RHLs fall somewhere in between, all three groups may be impacted by a complex array of factors. HLLs may have lower motivation because they value the language for purposes that require other varieties than the one taught in school, and they can benefit from greater awareness of the professional benefits of attaining academic skills in MSA. RHLs may enjoy the language learning process more because they come to school with greater proficiency

and continue to have more exposure to Arabic than FLLs, while at the same time they do not have to disentangle their knowledge from the different vocabulary and more highly inflected grammar of MSA. Still, they may wish they could study their home language instead of Arabic. FLLs have to rely on the school's extrinsic motivators as well as instrumental goals relating to college and career. Without encouragement and support from their teachers and families, they may lose interest and experience non-motivation, but they can also be enthusiastic learners who experience strong intrinsic motivation.

### **Conclusion**

In the same way that languages such as Arabic are valued both as heritage languages and as critical languages, accurately identifying heritage learners of Arabic and using this information for appropriate placement and as a basis for developing motivation will serve the interests and needs of families and communities as well as educational systems and national policy makers. When learners enter programs like this one, teachers may be better equipped to place students in appropriate classes based on proficiency as well as prior and ongoing exposure to the language and to adapt instruction in some ways to address the professed motivations of different groups. While it certainly would not be appropriate for teachers to assume that every student who comes from a particular background will have the same desire to learn Arabic, the data and instruments discussed here may help them to ask appropriate questions. A well-elaborated understanding of the motivations of learners and their parents may help teachers and administrators to encourage students and involve parents in the process more effectively. FLL parents may need encouragement themselves so that they can understand the challenges as well as the benefits of Arabic. FLL students as well as HLLs and RHLs may enjoy meeting older, more advanced learners of Arabic or professionals who use Arabic in their careers who come from a variety of backgrounds and can discuss their efforts to learn the language over time. Also, programs like this one may need to reconsider the separation of learners from different backgrounds in their classes. While on one hand it is expedient to separate low-proficiency FLLs from RHLs who are already literate and HLLs, if this separation is

too complete then the program as a whole cannot benefit from its positioning within a community of people who use and value the target language.

From the perspective of policy makers who want to increase the foreign language capacities of the U.S. population, programs such as this one, offer opportunities for learners from various backgrounds to begin learning challenging languages at a very young age. As the U.S. educational system strives to prepare citizens for a global society, it is imperative to encourage not only HLLs but also learners from monolingual English-speaking backgrounds to strive for high levels of attainment in their language learning. FLLs who develop literacy and some communicative ability in elementary, middle, and high school may enter college language programs with abilities in the language that make them comparable to many HLLs and RHLs, while young HLLs and RHLs may recognize a wider range of uses for their language abilities and choose to study the target language at a higher level. If more students were beginning their language studies at a younger age in schools like this one and had effective articulation from elementary to middle to high school (Wiley, 2007), programs at universities and other institutions would begin to see a pool of learners who had greater potential to attain high levels of competence through their studies.

This study has attempted to address the variations in motivation and prior proficiency among learners from different language and cultural backgrounds and their parents. While these findings may be useful in constructing a snapshot of the school population and its needs at the beginning of one school year, a more thorough study of motivation should take into account the many contextual factors that impact the dynamics of motivation across much longer periods of time (Dörnyei, 1994; Gardner, 2006). Data collected in this context over the subsequent year including class observations, further interviews, discussions with teachers, writing samples, and an end-of-year survey need to be analyzed and reported. This larger, more longitudinal picture will elaborate our understanding not only of the motivations that students and their parents bring to the learning experience but also the factors that impact their motivation and their learning over time.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Student beginning-of-year questionnaire items regarding proficiency and motivation.

(1) How well did you know Arabic **before** you started studying it at this school? (*put a check (✓) next to one*)

\_\_\_\_\_ I didn't know Arabic at all      \_\_\_\_\_ I could speak but not read or write      \_\_\_\_\_ I could read the alphabet but not speak      \_\_\_\_\_ I could speak, read, and write Arabic

(2) What are the **reasons** you are studying Arabic in school? (*put a check (✓) next to all that apply*)

_____ I enjoy learning languages	_____ It's required by my school
_____ My parents want me to learn it	_____ It will help me communicate with my relatives
_____ My religion tells me that I should know it	_____ I want to understand Arabic on TV or Internet
_____ I want to speak to native speakers of Arabic	_____ I want to travel to an Arabic-speaking country
_____ It will help me get into a good college	_____ It will help me get a good job
_____ Other ( <i>please explain</i> ): _____	

### Appendix B. Parent survey items regarding the choice of this school and importance of language learning and Arabic.

(1) Why did you decide to send your child (or children) to this school? (*check (✓) all that apply*)

- \_\_\_\_\_ I thought my child would benefit from this school's teachers, philosophy, \_\_\_\_\_ and methods
- \_\_\_\_\_ I wanted my child to study a language other than English (any language)
- \_\_\_\_\_ I wanted my child to study Modern Standard Arabic
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

(2) Do you consider Arabic your native language?    **Yes**    **No**

(3) Do you consider Arabic a heritage language for your children?

**Yes**    **No**    **Don't know**

(4) How do you think learning Modern Standard Arabic in school will help your child? Decide how important each reason below is **to you**. *Circle one number for each item: 1=Not important, 5=Extremely important*

Reason for Child to Learn Arabic	Importance
a. Learning another language is good for the development of my child's mind	1 2 3 4 5
b. Learning another language will help my child communicate with more people	1 2 3 4 5

c.	Learning another language will help my child understand other cultures	1	2	3	4	5
d.	Knowing another language will help my child get into a good college	1	2	3	4	5
e.	Knowing another language will help my child get a good job	1	2	3	4	5
f.	Knowing Arabic will allow my child to communicate with our relatives and friends	1	2	3	4	5
g.	Knowing Arabic will allow my child to travel to the Middle East	1	2	3	4	5
h.	Knowing Arabic will allow my child to participate in our religious activities	1	2	3	4	5
i.	Knowing Arabic will allow my child to access Arabic-language media including books, television, and Internet	1	2	3	4	5
j.	Other ( <i>please explain</i> ): _____	1	2	3	4	5