The impact of culturally tailored Arabic courses on learners' motivation and proficiency

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Abstract

This is a research on how culturally oriented courses in Arabic influence the motivation and language proficiency of learners. Although the conventional Arabic models tend to focus on grammar and standardized material, they do not always take into account the cultural backgrounds of their students and their life experiences, which may affect the engagement and the learning results. The research design is a mixed-methods quasi-experimental study that assesses two groups of adult learners; one experimental group where learners received culturally aligned instructions and the other control group that was taught using a conventional curriculum. Pre- and post-tests on motivation (modified after the AMTB and L2 Motivational Self System) and proficiency (based on ACTFL/CEFR standards) were taken to gather quantitative data. The qualitative data of interviews, classroom observations and journals by learners gave an opportunity to understand how learners view cultural relevance. Findings have shown that students who received culturally sensitive teaching showed a much better motivation, engagement, and achievement in reading, writing, listening, and speaking than students who were in the control group. Findings of the qualitative research indicate that cultural relevance increased the confidence of learners, meaningful learning, and continued engagement. The research has ended with the conclusion that culturally sensitive Arabic instruction is useful to enhance not only motivational but also linguistic results, but also the curriculum development, teacher education, and the future research of the Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) setting.

Keywords: *learning Arabic language, cultural adaptation, motivation, language proficiency, SLA, culturally responsive pedagogy.*

Introduction

Motivation and relevance are well-known key determinants in the successful

acquisition of a second language (L2). The decades of study have shown that the attitudes, self-concepts, and personality relationships of learners towards teaching material have a strong impact on the engagement and language performance (Dornyei, 2005; Gardner, 2010). Although Arabic has increasingly become important in worldwide academia, professional and cultural domains, Arabic language programs, particularly those based outside the Arab world, tend to be based on standardized, grammar-driven curricula, which do not sufficiently consider cultural identity, interests and backgrounds of learners (Ryding, 2013). These methods can curtail the motivation of the learners and diminish the chances of having active engagement with the language.

The culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies highlight the significance of engaging learners by incorporating their cultural experiences into the learning process and encouraging their involvement, identification, and higher-order learning (Gay, 2018; Paris and Alim, 2017). Within the context of L2 teaching, the scientists have demonstrated that the use of culturally relevant materials can help students develop a feeling of competence, decrease anxiety, and become more connected to the target language (Kramsch, 1993; Byrd Clark and Dervin, 2014).

Nevertheless, even though there has been increased interest in culturally inclusive pedagogical approaches, the body of empirical research concerning culturally customized curricula in the context of Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) is rather scarce.

This difference is especially important since Arabic is especially difficult to be learned by non-native speakers due to the nature of a diglossic language, a different system of writing and cultural specifics (Al-Batal, 2017). Students tend to complain of being unable to relate what they learn in the classroom with their own lives, which can make the perseverance weak and decrease the development of proficiency in the long-term. Provided that culturally-differentiated content can enhance relevance and motivation, it may produce a significant change in the Arabic language classrooms. Besides, incorporate applied grammar into teaching Arabic to non-native speaker can enhance learner motivation toward language skills proficiency as Nasirudeen (2022) stated that applied grammar instruction enhances both the accuracy and communicative ability of non-native Arabic learners. Similarly, to applied grammar Nasirudeen (2023) found that explicit morphology instruction is highly effective in enhancing learners' comprehension and production of ASP-specific terminology.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of the study is to explore the impact of culturally oriented Arabic lessons on the motivation and the proficiency of the language among the learners. The specific objectives are:

- To test the influences of culturally-adjusted Arabic coursework on the motivation of learners.
- To determine how culturally sensitive teaching can affect the Arabic language proficiency of learners both reading, writing, listening, and speaking.
- To investigate how learners deemed the education material as valuable and culturally applicable.
- To examine the correlation between motivation and achievement of learners in terms of proficiency in the setting of culturally oriented instruction.

Research Questions

The following are the research questions that this study tries to answer:

- **RQ1:** Does developing trainees who are involved in a culturally customized Arabic course influence their motivation in comparison with a regular curriculum?

- **RQ2:** How does culturally-specific teaching Arabic influence the proficiency of learning students in reading, writing, listening and speaking?

- **RQ3:** What is the perception of learners towards the cultural relevance of the course and how does perception affect motivation and performance of the learners?

- **RQ4:** Does motivation among learners have any significant relationship with their language proficiency when using culturally-adjusted Arabic instruction?

Answering these questions, the research will integrate quantitative assessments of motivation and proficiency and qualitative understanding of the experience of the learners, which will give an exhaustive perspective of the pedagogical advantages of culturally-tuned instructions of Arabic.

Literature Review

Second Language Acquisition Motivation.

The motivation factor is a critical success factor towards second language acquisition (SLA). The socio-educational model developed by Gardner insists that motivation is a conglomeration of effort, desire and favourable attitudes to the learning environment (Gardner, 2010). The parameter of integrative motivation or

interest of the learner to interact with the target language community is mostly applicable in culturally mediated learning conditions. Similarly, Nasirudeen and Chtaibi (2022) affirmed that digital platforms significantly improve learner engagement, facilitate the acquisition of foundational skills such as reading, writing, and listening, and provide flexible, self-paced learning opportunities.

Dornyei (2005, 2009) proposed L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), which comprises of Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self and Learning Experience. This model shows the effects of the personal relevance and identity alignment on the learner engagement. The empirical research evidence shows that motivation can be enhanced when the instructional content is culturally relevant to the learners and their desired future (Taguchi, Magid, and Papi, 2009). In addition to that, dynamic views about motivation emphasize its situational quality demonstrating that instruction culturally significant may stimulate learner interest and endurance (Ushioda, 2011).

The Role of Culture in Language Learning

Cultural understanding can not be separated with language learning. Kramsch (1993) assumes that productive teaching must establish a third space, where learners can bargain over cultural meanings and identities. According to Byrd Clark and Dervin (2014), cultural incorporation of learners to enhance intercultural learning is also significant. Learning theories such as culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018) and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris and Alim, 2017) focus on the inclusion of cultural experiences of learners in the curriculum and the promotion of engagement, investment in identities, and motivation. Emprical research indicates that culturally relevant resources have the potential to promote the self-efficacy of learners, decrease anxiety, and promote perseverance (Ebe, 2012; Lucas and Villegas, 2011). These results directly concern RQ 1 and RQ 3 that investigate the impact of cultural tailoring on motivation and perception on the part of learners.

Arabic as a Foreign Language: challenges and Pedagogical Consideration.

Arabic is an uncommon language that poses special challenges in mastering in non-native learners: its diglossic nature, script, and cultural diversity (Al-Batal, 2017). The standardized curriculums tend to focus on Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and grammar oriented lessons and give minimal exposure to the dialects and

the authentic cultural text (Ryding, 2013). It may result in disinterestedness and lack of motivation, especially among non-Arab students (Taha, 2018).

Studies show that the use of culturally relevant and authentic materials enhances interaction and understanding (Palmer, 2007; Wahba, Taha, and England, 2017). These findings can be discussed as they prove RQ2 and RQ4 which explore the connection between culturally specific instruction, proficiency acquisition, and motivation.

Culturally Tailored Instruction and Motivation

The instruction is culturally based on the idea that learners can deliver better when their identities and experiences are valued. Furthermore, Gay (2018) claims that culturally responsive teaching enhances the self-efficacy, which is directly connected to motivation. A culturally relevant material in the context of SLA helps to cultivate a significant relationship between the target language and the life of learners and increase their engagement and intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Ushioda, 2011). Whereas the majority of the studies have involved the use of languages like English and Spanish, this research work further expands the research

to Arabic as a Foreign Language, which is in tandem with RQ 1 and RQ 3.

Cultural Tailored Instruction and Language Proficiency

Motivation and proficiency go hand in hand with high motivation usually resulting in more practice, exposure and gains of language (Dornyei and Ushioda, 2011). Relevant materials in terms of culture enhance clarity, memorization, and contextual application of language (Ebe, 2012; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). Cultural familiar situations in communications and dialogue encourage genuine communication and lessen anxiety (Horwitz, 2013). The responses of heritage Arabic learners indicate that the engagement and performance are improved by culturally related materials (Albirini, 2014), which answers RQ2 and RQ4.

Research Gap

Although the field of motivation, culturally responsive pedagogy, and SLA have been researched extensively, there are still a few gaps in teaching Arabic language:

- Little empirical research on culturally-specific curricula in the context of Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL).

- Not many studies that provide measurements of motivation and proficiency simultaneously.

- Absence of mixed methods designs to address the perceptions of cultural relevance of learners.

- Very few quasi-experimental studies that compare culturally customized and conventional instruction.

This paper fills these gaps by evaluating the impacts of the culturally differentiated Arabic classes on motivation and proficiency as well as capturing the perceptions of learners in direct relation to the research objectives and questions of the study.

Methodology

Research Design

A quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design that was mixed-method was utilized to answer the research questions and to address the research objectives. Two intact Arabic classes were picked:

Experimental group: Culturally adapted Arabic teaching was received.

Control group: Was provided with a normal textbook-type curriculum.

The design is also relevant to the aims of the study such as investigating the impact of culturally oriented instruction on motivation (Objective 1; RQ1),

proficiency (Objective 2; RQ2) and understanding the perception of the learners (Objective 3; RQ3) and the relationship between motivation and proficiency (Objective 4; RQ4).

Quantitative data were pre and post tests of motivation and language proficiency whereas qualitative data were gathered using semi structured interviews, classroom observations and learner journals in which interviewer were able to offer a reflection of the experiences and perceptions of the learner.

Participants

The participants were 60 adult learners that were taking either beginner or intermediate Arabic classes at a university language center. The ages were 18-45, and all the participants were not native speakers of Arabic. The following categories were grouped into classes:

Experimental group (n [?] 30)

Control group (n [?] 30)

Pretest scores also confirmed that the two groups were similar in terms of their initial levels of proficiency and motivation, which will be valid in RQ1, RQ2, and RQ4.

Instructional Intervention

Experimental Group:

The culturally customized teaching was developed according to the principles of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018)

and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris and Alim, 2017). Features included:

- Writings and media on the cultural background of learners.
- Arabic original content (e.g., movies, music, social media posts)
- Tasks like communicating in familiar culturally related environments.
- Combination of MSA and appropriate dialects.
- Actions that promote identity expression and cross-cultural thought.

Control Group:

Generally conventional MSA-based instruction in the textbook, grammar-translation, and little cultural contextualization.

Time frame: 10 weeks, three 90-minute sessions a week (estimated to be 45 hours of instruction).

Instruments

Motivation Survey: Version of the AMTB (2010) by Gardner and the L2MSS (2005) by Dornyei are adjusted to RQ1 and RQ4.

Proficiency Test: Standardized ACTFL/CEFR-based test that includes reading, writing, listening and speaking that tackles RQ2 and RQ4.

Qualitative Tools: Semi-structured interviews, observations in classroom and reflection journals, which are associated with RQ3.

Data Collection and Analysis.

- Quantitative: Paired-sample and independent t-tests, repeated measure ANOVA, and correlation tests to determine the influence on motivation (RQ1) and proficiency (RQ2) and to determine the relationship between the two (RQ4).
- Qualitative: Interviews, observations, journals that will be thematically analysed to examine the views of the learners on cultural relevance (RQ3).

This was done in accordance with ethical guidelines, informed consent, confidentiality and IRB approval.

Results

Motivation (RQ1)

There were no differences in pretest motivation scores.

Posttest: Experimental group (M = 4.05, SD = 0.37) was significantly higher than control (M = 3.35, SD = 0.42), t(58) = 7.12, p <.001, Cohen d =1.84.

Interpretation: Objective 1 and RQ1 were met with Culturally tailored instruction

being a significant motivator of the learners.

Proficiency (RQ2)

Skill   Experimental Pre

Experimental post   Control Pre

Control post.

Reading	55.2	72.8	54.7	61.3
Writing	52.6	70.1	53.0	60.5
Listening	57.4	74.0	56.9	63.2
Speaking	50.8	68.5	51.0	59.8

Repeated-measures ANOVA: There are significant time x group interaction of all skills ($p < .001$, e2 =.32-.45).

Correlation: Addressing Objective 4 and RQ 4, motivation positively correlates with gains of the proficiency gains (r =.68, $p < .001$).

Learner Perceptions (RQ3)

Important themes of interviews, journals, and observations:

- Cultural relevance is more engaging - the learners became more involved and ready to engage.

- More confidence, less anxiety - real, familiar activities helped to talk.

- Significant learning and memorization - vocabulary and grammar were internalized better.

- Would like to learn more - the learners demonstrated their interest in learning more about the Arabic culture beyond the classroom.

It was observed that the involvement and the genuine use of Arabic were more in the case of the experimental group.

Discussion

Motivation (RQ1, Objective 1)

Instruction in a culturally-specific instruction brought a lot of motivation as per L2MSS theory (Dornyei, 2005; Taguchi et al., 2009). Students indicated greater personal connection to the material, which can offer evidence to the research on the motivational value of culturally relevant resources (Gay, 2018; Ebe, 2012).

Proficiency (RQ2, Objective 2)

Important improvements in reading, writing, listening, and speaking indicate that cultural relevance increases comprehension, retention, as well as communicative competence (Albirini, 2014; Ebe, 2012). The correlation between motivation and proficiency gains is positive which validates the interconnection presented in RQ4 and Objective 4.

The learner perceptions (RQ3, Objective 3)

Thematic analysis also found that engagement, confidence and meaningful learning were reinforced by cultural relevance. These results support the significance of implementing the cultural experiences of the learners into the process

of curriculum design, proving RQ3 and objective 3.

Pedagogical Implications

- Culturally relevant texts and authentic media should be included in curriculum development by the developers.
- Culturally responsive approaches should be used by teachers to promote motivation and proficiency.
- Proficiency gain can be mediated with motivation, and this demonstrates the significance of affective factors in the Arabic teaching.
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Limitations

- Single –site study limits generalizability.
- Short-term (10 weeks) - long-term consequences are unknown.
- Self-report measures can be affected by social desirability bias.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

In this paper, it is established that a culturally-specific Arabic instruction has a positive effect on motivation, proficiency, and engagement of learners, which proves all the objectives of research:

- Objective 1 / RQ1: Motivation was increased significantly.

- Objective 2/ RQ2: There were greater gains in proficiency in the experimental group.
- Objective 3 / RQ3: The learners felt that the materials were culturally relevant and interesting.
- Objective 4 /RQ4: There was a positive correlation between motivation and proficiency.

Recommendations

Curriculum Developers: Incorporate both culturally relevant contents and authentic tasks; incorporate MSA with dialects.

Teachers: Use culturally responsive practices, relate learning activities to the experiences of the learners and promote effective communication.

Future Research: Multi site research, study long-term effects, and digital and multimedia culturally customized resources.

Final Remarks

When culture is incorporated in teaching Arabic, the motivation, engagement and measurable increase in proficiency are increased. This paper highlights the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in the L2 learning especially Arabic as a Foreign Language.

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