

Motivation of American College Students to Study Arabic

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Abstract

This paper explores the motivations of American college students to study Arabic. A sample of 229 students enrolled in Arabic classes in six colleges were administered a survey. They were given a list of 29 reasons to study Arabic, each reason reflecting a different kind of motivation. The respondents were asked to choose their top four reasons and rank them in order of importance (1,2,3,4). The results show that a variety of motivations can play an important role in a student's decision to learn Arabic. Whereas many students are career-oriented, others are interested in the language itself and pursue it for its academic stimulation. Still, others learn Arabic to be more knowledgeable about the culture, history, and religion of the Arab people. However, there are those who feel a greater sense of national threat due to changes in the sociopolitical context, and they learn the language out of patriotism. Finally, the study also reveals an interesting finding which points to respondents' perception that due to globalization and advancement in technology they now belong to the wider community of the world. This becomes a dimension of their identity and motivates them to learn foreign languages.

Key words: Motivation, Arabic, College students

Introduction

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, an estimated one and a half billion people spoke English (Crystal, 2010), almost a quarter of the world's population. The popularity of English as the world's de facto lingua franca is generally explained by the proliferation of American culture and economic influence around the globe. In a world increasingly dominated by English, learning a foreign language may seem less vital among English speakers. Americans have historically relied on other countries to speak English and have felt little pressure to learn another language. This attitude is ironic, considering that the United States has always been a multiethnic, multilingual society, in which more than 380 languages are spoken in communities nationwide (Modern Language Association of America [MLA], 2012; Porter, 2010; see also "Census 2011," 2012; Koning, 2009). Moreover, this attitude is not warranted today because we live with an increasingly interdependent globalized marketplace, where the social landscape is rapidly changing and communication is more accessible than ever before. Societies have to adapt to new contexts, interact with new cultures, and collaboratively address challenges such as world health, terrorism, human rights, and environmental protection. We can best achieve this substantial necessity through the learning of foreign languages because language represents a crucial means of communication between people of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and—most importantly—it is the primary carrier of culture (Ben-Rafael & Brosh, 1991; MacCormack, Forbath, Brooks, & Kalaher, 2007; Taha, 2007).

Knowledge of foreign languages helps us understand and value cultural differences and thus create a healthier and stronger society. Such knowledge can prepare people to support America's economic competitiveness and further strategic interests. In 2006, President Bush launched the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI), a plan to dramatically increase the number of Americans learning "critical-need" foreign languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Russian, and Urdu/Hindi through new and expanded programs (Powell & Lowenkorn, 2006). Learning foreign languages is a high-stakes issue, as U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan rightly said, "Our country needs to create a future in which all Americans understand that by speaking more than one language, they are enabling our country to compete successfully and work collaboratively with partners across the globe." (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). In the same vein, Leon Panetta, when speaking at his Senate Select Intelligence Committee hearing in 2009, called for a stronger focus in the U.S. on the mastery of foreign languages:

For the United States to get to where it needs to be will require a national commitment to strengthening America's foreign language proficiency.... Mastery of a second language allows us to capture the nuances that are essential to true understanding.... It is crucial to the CIA's mission (Panetta, 2009).

In another meeting with foreign language educators (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2010), Panetta further stated,

The United States should require language study beginning at a younger age...[;] we need to get back to mandating language training as a requirement for graduating from college.... It is vital to our economic interests and to our diplomacy.

Knowledge of a foreign language provides a competitive edge to multinational corporations as well as small business and individual entrepreneurs (Taha, 2007). The success of trans-global transactions depends on the ability of the parties to understand each other and to acknowledge cultural, religious and geographical differences. Although institutions of higher education recruit international students and talk about graduating "citizens of the world," they offer only a limited number of foreign languages and very few institutions allow students to make a foreign language a specialty. According to an MLA report (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2007), even though the number of students who learn foreign languages in colleges and universities has risen by 12.9% in the last decade, it was still the case that in 2006 only 8.6% of the 17.6 million college students learned a foreign language (more than half of them learned Spanish). In other words, 91.4% of all college students in America did not learn a foreign language. Only 1% of all students (at all levels) learned critical-need languages.

The necessity for learning foreign languages raises another question: What languages do Americans study and why? There is no obvious correlation between the number of people who speak a language worldwide and its popularity as a subject in American colleges and universities. In fact, many of the world's most spoken languages are neglected in American universities. Mandarin is the most common first language in the world, spoken by nearly 15% of the world's population but it is studied by only 2.3% of college students (Janus, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). French is the second most studied language in the U.S., yet it barely ranks as the 10th most spoken language worldwide (Crystal, 2010). Such statistics show no simple equation exists for understanding language study in American colleges because such understanding involves a range of factors that all interact. Factors include educational supply and demand in terms of what is offered in high school, difficulty of the language, economic markets, political atmosphere, and sociocultural changes. Though French, German, Russian, and Spanish have long been classified among the most commonly studied languages in the U.S., their position is not unchanging. Enrollment in Russian showed a drastic decrease since the end of the Cold War and the subject has continued to lose numbers.

This decrease implies a relationship between political climate and language study. The perception of a language's current importance may be highly linked to how the nations who speak it are involved with the United States. Whereas Russian has decreased in popularity, Arabic, which is still considered a *less commonly taught language* (LCTL), has been an increasingly popular language since the 1991 Gulf War and especially after the attacks on September 11, 2001. It is this particular phenomenon that this paper addresses. The events of September 11th and their aftermath have shifted the political hot spots from Europe to Asia and the Middle East. As new forms of nativism arise, the United States continues to become more ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse (Crystal, 2010). Some Americans may find it necessary to understand the "Other" to effectively wage war. Alternatively, others may hope that through further interaction between the cultures they can reach peace. In either case, language can be understood as a key component in both protection and prevention. The complicated picture of Americans and their views on Arabic language and culture makes this study relevant.

The Survey Questions

This exploratory study examines not only why American college students choose to learn Arabic but also why they choose to learn it now. What attitudes and motivations make the student choose Arabic rather than another language? Are these motivations primarily cultural and "integrative," reflecting the student's desire to be a part of the community who speaks the language? Or, is the motivation "instrumental," deriving from the perception that acquisition will lead to economic or educational advantage? Using theories that describe different motivational orientations—economic, academic, sociopolitical, and heritage-related—sketch a portrait of the population.

The study suggests opportunities for further elaboration by identifying the reasons that were the most popular to the population as a whole. To answer the survey questions, the study must be situated within today's political climate.

The Case of Arabic

In the year 2000, languages of the Middle East made up only 2% of all foreign language classes offered in the United States: 1.3% Hebrew and 0.5% Arabic (Cummings, 2001). According to government figures in 2001, American colleges and universities graduated only nine students who majored in Arabic language and literature (Schemo, 2001). The September 11th attacks in 2001 comprised the second "Sputnik moment" in recent American history, highlighting the importance of studying foreign languages and focusing in particular on Arabic. This language showed significant growth nationwide and its enrollment has tripled since then. A recent MLA report (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2010) found that the study of Arabic accounted for the largest percentage growth in U.S. colleges and universities: Enrollments grew by 46.3% between 2006 and 2009. Today, Arabic ranks as the 8th most studied foreign language, up from 10th in 2006. The majority of the Arabic classes offered are at the introductory level, indicating that most students who take Arabic in college have little or no prior experience with the language.

Pressure on colleges and universities to install or augment Middle Eastern studies have come from all directions. The Department of Defense and other government agencies, businesses and other educational institutions have all expressed the need for more attention in this area. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan created a new demand in federal agencies for speakers of Arabic and other critical-need languages. To cope with this growing demand, colleges and universities have created or expanded Islamic, Arabic, and Middle Eastern Studies departments and programs. As the study of Arabic became more pertinent to Americans than ever before, universities, bolstered with federal funding, inaugurated language flagship programs.

Following the 9/11 attacks, a general fear has developed and with it misconceptions of the Arab people. Such fear was displayed through violent crimes and acts of hate against American citizens of Arab descent. Partially in reaction to this situation, academic institutions are seeking specialists to educate students and dispel misconceptions about the cultures of the Middle East.

The current national landscape makes an inquiry into the motivations and attitudes of Arabic students both interesting and challenging. The growing demand for Arabic speakers has increased the utility value of the language as well as the perception of its usefulness to Americans who may feel they can play a part in serving their nation. Of course, the fact that Arabic is the fifth most commonly spoken language in the world is enough to warrant its usefulness in an increasingly globalized marketplace (Crystal, 2010).

Whereas some students may wish to understand the "Other," many American students of Middle Eastern descent study the language in an effort to better understand ethnic roots. Arabic, being the language of the Arab world, is also the language of Islam and thus it has a global significance (Dahbi, 2004). More than 1.2 billion Muslims use the language for prayer. America is home to a large and active Muslim population with conversion rates on the rise. The desire to read religious texts in their original language may be a factor for Muslims and students of religion alike. In all, such conditions contribute to a growing demand and ultimate need in developing a greater capacity for Arabic.

The Integrative/Instrumental Divide and Beyond

Studies of second and foreign language acquisition no longer emphasize purely educational predictors to determine the success of students but rely as well on "affective variables," including motivational, orientational, and personal/cultural variables (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, 1985). Motivation is a complex term, which intends to explain the direction and magnitude of human behavior that is the choice of a particular action and the persistence with it (Dörnyei 2001, 2005). In an attempt to explain variation in L2 motivation in multicultural environments, Gardner and Lambert (1972) made a distinction between the goal aspect of motivation, i.e. the objectives or purposes of the language study and the intensity of the motivation. The former was defined as an orientation toward the learning process, which could be integrative or instrumental, and the latter was defined as the effort and desire to learn the language. Integrative orientation reflects a genuine interest in the L2 culture and a desire to identify and communicate with members of that community.

Instrumental orientation indicates a utilitarian approach to language learning, that is, the desire to learn the language for some educational or occupational advantage (Dörnyei, 2002; Gardner 1985, 2001; Pavlenko, 2013; Spolsky 1989). Although Gardner maintains that theoretically either type of orientation could support motivation to learn a language, his hypothesis is that the integrative orientation provides more motivation to sustain long-term effort (Gardner & Lambert 1972). This concept of integrativeness was used by researchers as an important part of their theoretical models of L2 learning such as Schumann's acculturation theory (1986) and Dörnyei's extended L2 motivational model (1994a, 1994b). However, research results have not always supported this hypothesis. In some studies, little empirical evidence was found to support that integrative orientation is linked to learning an additional language (Clément & Kruidenier, 1983; McDonough, 1981). Moreover, in the case of Israel, despite negative attitudes toward the L2 group and the lack of identification with them, Israeli Arabs are successful in learning L2 Hebrew (Ibrahim et al., 2008).

Oxford and Shearin (1994) are critical of the integrative/instrumental approach and call for a reassessment of current assumptions and an expansion of the kind of theories drawn upon in the field. They suggest the application of psychological "Need Theories" in studies of language motivation. They incorporate the work of Abraham Maslow, who asserts that an individual directs his or her activity in order to satisfy needs that range hierarchically from the biological to the psychological (Maslow, 1943). Maslow divides needs into five levels: biological, security, love, esteem, and self-actualization. Oxford and Shearin use this model to explain the motivational differences between L2 and FL learners. L2 learners may experience needs from the lowest to the highest level on the hierarchy; they may need tools of expression in order to get even the most basic needs met and their inability to communicate can certainly be endangering. They may also experience profound loneliness and lack of esteem, which would make self-actualization highly difficult. Conversely, when psychological needs are not met, L2 learners may lose their motivations down the hierarchy. As for FL learners' needs, they are usually positioned in the third and fourth levels of the hierarchy: love and esteem. Considering the case of Arabic students in the United States, some may perceive the study of Arabic as an issue of national security and thus closely relate the need for safety and security.

In the era of globalization, the discussion about integrative orientation moved beyond the 'affective factors' and now takes a new direction as researchers investigate the learning of English as a global language without a specific target reference group of speakers (Dörnyei, 2009; Graddol, 2006). Some researchers called to broaden the definition of integrative motivation to focus on identifying with the global community rather than with a specific geographic and ethnolinguistic one (McClelland, 2000; Yashima, 2002, 2009). In an attempt to reconceptualize motivation, Dörnyei and Ushioda suggest that the process of identification is an internal process within the person self-concept rather than identification with an external reference group (Ushioda, 2005; Dörnyei et al., 2006, Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009, 2011). Dörnyei draws on the theory of "possible selves", which refers to individuals' representations of attributes that someone ideally likes to possess, thus providing a conceptual link between the self-concept and motivation. A basic hypothesis is that if proficiency in the target language is part of one's self, this will constitute a strong motivational factor in learning the language. Lamb, in his studies (2004, 2009) suggests that the motivation of Indonesian junior high school students to learn English may partly be shaped by having two cultural identities – world identity and local national identity. Changes in these identities might result in changes in motivation. Norton (2000) developed the motivational concept of "investment" to capture the learners' relationship to the target language and their ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. When learners invest in a language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wide range of symbolic and material resources, which will enhance their cultural capital, identity and desires for the future. Thus an investment in the target language is also an investment in the learner's own identity.

The other concept of instrumental orientation has also been a frequently highlighted variable in L2 motivational research (Dörnyei, 1990; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1991). This concept can also be linked to the ideal L2 self-theory as in one's idealized self and the desire to be professionally successful (Dörnyei, 2009). Simultaneously, ambiguity emerged with this concept as well. Some studies didn't find clear and obvious empirical evidence to link the utilitarian dimension to L2 learning (Dörnyei, 2002; Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000). The concept of integrative orientation has generally been measured as a desire to associate with members of other groups and to appreciate their culture. Another context is that of ethnic minorities studying their own language. In two studies of French-Americans learning French in a school setting, Gardner and Lambert (1972) conclude that the adjustment of the minority group member in a bilingual setting required a delicate balance of attitudes and skills.

They also stressed that instrumentality has a different meaning when applied to people studying their own language. Similarly, Spolsky (1989) used attitudes toward Israel and its people as a measure of integrative orientation for Jewish students studying Hebrew in a diaspora community. Integrative orientation is also viewed as the most common reason for “heritage” students studying “less commonly taught languages” in the United States. According to Janus (1999), those categorized as heritage learners in the U.S. are Americans who wanted to solidify ties to their culture and talk to parents and grandparents while discovering more about their roots or ethnicity.

It is important to differentiate between L2 and FL studies, because these forms of acquisition take place in different environments, which imply different motivations. Studies have focused on integrative orientations as the basis of motivation for L2 learners and as the sustaining force to keep the process of acquiring the language going (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007; Dörnyei, 1990, 1994, 2005). It therefore follows that those living in that community would make such desires intense simply by their sheer contact with L2 speakers. Dörnyei (1990) argues that FL learners, in contrast, generally do not have enough experience to have developed strong attitudes toward the cultures in which the target language is spoken. As a result, they lack both the desire and the understanding to become integrated into the L2 group. Additionally, in a predominately monolingual country, FL learners have little opportunity to use the language outside the classroom, thus reducing their chances to integrate into another language, culture, and community. On the contrary, when the FL study takes place in a multilingual and multicultural society, such as the United States, the learner may have ethnic ties to those who speak the language. Such contexts offer important insight and the need to differentiate between them in an attempt to better understand the concepts of motivation involved.

A positive attitude toward a culture or a desire to travel need not be entirely regarded as an integrative reason and must be seen in a broader context (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Students might be motivated to travel to foreign countries and might be attracted to foreign cultures without a desire to integrate. FL acquisition thus requires a less rigid definition of cultural motivators. Particularly in the United States today, Arabic students may have an academic interest in another culture that does not involve any desire to assimilate but merely to understand. Anthropologists define *culture* as a shared system of meaning, and thus language can be considered a key component of a desire to learn about another culture. Surveys to determine the specific motivations of American students to learn Arabic at the college level identified such major factors as employment, cultural understanding, religion, travel abroad, and understanding family roots (al-Batal, 2006; Husseinali, 2006).

Although various cultural motivations play a key role for many students of Arabic, the business status of certain Arabic-speaking countries also classified as a form of motivation. In *The Economic Utility of Foreign Language Study*, Grosse, Tuman, and Critz (1998) create a model that explains more comprehensively the relationship between choice of language and instrumentality. Learners expect to have the greatest amount of satisfaction or utility from the language of their choice. The benefits of an FL are measured by its perceived usefulness and the costs are measured not only monetarily but also by the degree of difficulty in gaining proficiency.

Cumulatively, these studies exhibit that no single reason exists for a students’ choice of a language or for their success and commitment to its study. Rather, these studies show that a combination of factors leads to language choice and acquisition. A variety of theoretical frameworks can provide an enriched understanding of what motivates someone to study an L2. In an attempt to bring about more determinative results, we look at the factors explaining a single motivation for a student’s choice rather than compare the motivations themselves. In other words, a student’s perception that a language is useful in the job market may be affected by his or her culturally based desire to be in an area where the language is widely used. Considering three possible motivations—culture, economic utility, and perceptions for the need to address issues of national security—this explorative study examines the effects of different factors on these motivations.

Instruments

I collected the data through a two-part survey and follow-up focus interviews to add significant depth to the findings so that conclusions can be drawn. The first part of the survey included background information (gender, age, ethnicity, religion, mother tongue, travel abroad, and so on); the second part consisted of a list of 29 reasons, to reflect a wide range of motivations for studying Arabic. I drew the reasons both from research literature and from students’ answers to a pilot questionnaire. I selected reasons to reflect both integrative and instrumental motivations.

The survey respondents were asked to choose the 4 major reasons from the list and to rank them in order of importance. To better understand the quantitative results of the study follow-up, focus interviews of 10-15 minutes in length with 15 students were conducted. The purpose was to reveal themes and rationale in students' motivation to study Arabic. They were asked to give opinions and explain why some reasons are more important than others.

The Survey Population

I administered the survey to a sample population of 229 students enrolled in Arabic classes at six colleges and universities. In regards to gender, 55.8% of the respondents were female while 44.2% were male. It must be noted, however, that women make up a majority of college students, approximately 58% nationwide, so these numbers most likely reflect that trend rather than any gender bias toward or against Arabic language study. Most of the respondents (90.7%) were between the ages of 17 and 22. More than half of the respondents (63%) were white, followed by those who identified themselves as "other" making up 37%. These findings were not consistent with national rates of college students: In the 2006–07 academic year, about half (47.7%) of all degrees were awarded to white, non-Hispanic students (Knapp, Kelly-Raid & Ginder, 2008). Note that "Arab" was not a choice and those of mixed heritage had to choose either one of the available categories or "other". Finally, because of the paucity of students in each grouping, I recoded the data, classifying the survey respondents as either white (63.1%) or nonwhite (36.9%). In regards to religion, 63% of the respondents were Christians, 10% Muslims, 7% Atheists, 6% Jewish and 14% marked other religions. The vast majority of respondents were American born, with only 16% marking other categories, which included foreign, naturalized, and dual citizens.

Overall, the students were well traveled, with about half (50.5%) of the respondents having traveled to countries that spoke a language other than Arabic and 33.8% had visited an Arab country. Most students surveyed (67%) were in their first year of Arabic study, whereas a very small percentage (6%) was in their third year or above. I administered the survey to entire classes of students, and enrollment is always higher in entry-level classes; however, these findings were consistent with a documented trend in the loss of interest in an FL beyond the introductory courses. Of the sampled population, 95.1% spoke only English at home and only 4.9% spoke another language. More than a quarter of the respondents (28.4%) came from bilingual households; this is a relatively high percentage, because 86.11% of American households are reported to speak only English (Social Science Data Analysis Network, 2000). I recoded the data, classifying the respondents either as those who spoke only English or as "other". Most respondents are native English speakers (78.8%) or had learned English as a second language (17.3%). More than half of the respondents' fathers (54%) spoke two or more languages; 25% spoke two, and 29% spoke three or more. Similarly, more than half of the respondents' mothers (58%) spoke more than a single language.

Results

The respondents were asked to choose their top 4 reasons and label them in order of importance: "most important", "important", "moderately important" and "least important". I grouped the top two rankings together as "most important." and the next two as "important". Because the 3 reasons "Advantage when job hunting, "Work at a government agency" and "Work in the Middle East" are employment-related, I grouped them together as a composite "Employment" reason. I tabulated the survey results for the entire sample and reported them in Table 1.

Table 1: Students' Distribution of Reasons Regarding Selecting Arabic, in Percent (N=229)			
	"Most important"	"Important"	Total
1. Interest in the language.	39.7	20.1	59.8
2. I like people who speak Arabic.	1.8	2.2	4.0
3. I like the Arab culture.	4.8	8.3	13.1
4. It is required for my major.	17.0	19.7	36.7
5. My family speaks Arabic.	6.1	6.2	12.3
6. My friends speak Arabic.	3.1	1.3	4.4
7. Part of my ethnic heritage.	9.1	3.5	12.6
8. I have taken some Arabic.	1.8	0.0	1.8
9. Learn a different language.	10.9	12.7	23.6
10. It fits my schedule.	1.3	0.4	1.7
11. The only language class open.	0.0	0.0	0.0
12. Advantage when job hunting.	8.8	12.7	21.5
13. Parents' encouragement.	1.8	0.0	1.8
14. Parents force me to study.	0.0	0.0	0.0
15. To be part of Muslims.	1.3	0.9	2.2
16. Because of the teacher.	0.8	2.6	3.4
17. I live in an Arab neighborhood.	0.8	0.0	0.8
18. Interest in the Arab culture/history.	21.8	11.8	33.6
19. Read the Koran/ religious texts.	9.8	3.4	12.2
20. Knowledge about the Arab world.	8.7	12.7	21.4
21. Widely spoken language.	4.8	10.4	15.2
22. Communication with Arabs.	1.3	0.0	1.3
23. Work at a government agency.	10.7	6.6	17.3
24. Beautiful alphabet.	4.3	8.8	13.1
25. Interest in Arab music.	1.3	4.3	5.6
26. I like Arab food.	0.0	0.9	0.9
27. Work in the Middle East.	4.3	7.9	12.2
28. Effective faculty.	1.3	2.1	3.4
29. Successful in Arabic classes.	1.8	0.9	2.7

The most commonly chosen reasons are:

- (1) First choice - "Interest in the language", "Employment", "Interest in the Arab culture/history" and "It is required for my major".
- (2) Second choice - "Employment", "Interest in the language", "It is required for my major" and "Interest in the Arab culture/history".

The most commonly chosen reasons in total number of votes are "Interest in the language", "Employment", "It is required for my major", and "Interest in the Arab culture/history".

Note that the same 4 reasons were chosen in all three levels, though in a different order.

Findings and Discussion

In order to understand how the reasons are linked to motivations, I examined five categories of motivations. The first one relates to the integrative orientation, the other two categories relate to practical orientations and are based on a perception of the language's usefulness: economic utility and academic utility. The last two categories relate to more psychological and social factors: national threat and ethnic heritage.

The Integrative Orientation

The first priority, "Interest in the language" and the second priority, "Interest in the Arab culture/history", clearly point to the direction of integrative orientation. Participants are interested in knowing the language as a tool to get to know the people along with their culture and history. As one of the respondents explained, "Since I started learning Arabic, I am fascinated with the culture and the history of the Arabs. I will definitely continue studying the language in my graduate studies." Another respondent said, "The Arabs are very generous people."

“When I visited Morocco, they treated me so nicely and the Arabic language is full of greetings for every occasion.” Some respondents offered explanations in a different and interesting direction saying that the people in this globalized world constitute one big community. Such ideology represents a connection with one another through language hence the importance of knowing and learning languages. One of the respondents explained, “Arabic is my third language. I learn it because I belong to a globalized world and the possibilities to interact with native speakers of Arabic are considerable whether here in America, visits to Arab countries or on the Internet”. Another respondent made this point even clearer by saying, “For me, languages are bridges between the people of the world. The more languages I know, the more connected and informed I will be.” Globalization, advancement in telecommunications and economic interdependence, cause respondents to see themselves not only as part of their specific culture and language community but also as a part of a global community who speaks many languages. Belonging to the world community and wishing to establish a greater identity motivates them to learn foreign languages. This is in substantial agreement with Dörnyei’s theory of the person self-concept (2005, 2006), in which motivation to learn additional languages comes from inner self processes rather than identification with a specific language reference group.

Economic Utility

From an economic standpoint, the Arabic language continues to grow in value throughout the modern era. “I want to work and do business in the Middle East and my clients there will be more likely to trust me if I speak their language as opposed to using a translator.” “Because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Arabic speakers are in very high demand by the CIA, FBI and other governmental agencies.” Such examples represent how respondents explain their choice to learn the Arabic language. Its economic utility according to the survey, is measured by three variables, “Advantage when job hunting”, “Work at a government agency”, and “Work in the Middle East”. Each of these was a commonly chosen reason (total >10%) but the variance in the number of students who chose them may have important implications. Whereas 12.2% chose “Work in the Middle East”, 17.1% chose “Work at a government agency”; neither the numbers nor the concepts are necessarily exclusive (a respondent may choose both as reasons). This finding may imply two distinct types of motivations relating to earlier discussions of politics, language choice and the integrative/instrumental divide. Though some more instrumentally inclined students might see utility deriving from the fact that the U.S. needs Arabic speakers for defense, those who would like to seek employment in the Middle East might be more integratively motivated. They may want to assimilate into a foreign culture, and employment might be only one aspect. The perception that Arabic is a “widely spoken language” (total: 15.2%) may account for its general utility.

Academic Utility

According to the survey, the variables that fall under “academic utility” are, “It is required for my major”, “It fits my schedule”, and “The only language class open”. Only the first variable, however, is really a measure of importance to academics, the other two simply imply a lack of available options. Interestingly, “It is required for my major” was the most commonly chosen reason (total: 36.7%), whereas the other two were rarely or not at all chosen. The fact that students chose “It is required for my major” with such frequency does not necessarily mean that Arabic in particular was required, only that an FL was a requirement. One respondent explained, “I chose to study Arabic for my major because it is the language of the Qur’an and I want to understand first-hand what it says.” Another respondent explained, “I prefer to study Arabic for my major in Political Science so that I may gain deeper insights into people’s cultural, political, and religious values.” In such cases, the fact that students considered this an important reason implies that academic utility may be unjustifiably downplayed in many studies that seek to understand college-level language study because even a less commonly taught language was chosen by many for at least partially academic reasons. Additionally, students taking a language for a requirement seek a language that appeals to them for other reasons. They do not simply choose a more common foreign language, which might have more likely “fit their schedule.”

National Threat

Although related to economic utility, the desire to work for a government agency in particular rather than to work in another field—say, education or international business—makes that survey reason applicable to the national-threat category of motivations. In other words, there is a specific interest in government jobs that is not entirely related to economic utility. One of the respondents explained: “I learn Arabic because I am a patriot. America needs Arabic speakers.”

In another sense, a desire for “Knowledge about the Arab world” may measure another aspect of national-threat-related reasons as well as “Interest in the Arab culture/history.” These survey reasons can imply ethnic-heritage motivations, of course, but because they were chosen by such a large number of the respondents (21.4% and 33.6%, respectively), they should also be seen as deriving from motivations related to a desire to understand the cultures and relationships between the U.S. and the Middle East. One respondent explained, “I’m not going to join the FBI or CIA. It’s more of a way to bridge the gulf of misunderstanding.” Though the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have certainly inspired many to learn the language, others have become interested in understanding the Arab culture in order to gain better perspective of the conflict within the modern era.

Ethnic Heritage

The variables implying ethnic-heritage motivations are the survey reasons, “I like people who speak Arabic”, “My family speaks Arabic”, and “Part of my ethnic heritage”. This last reason was chosen by 12.6% of the respondents, and “My family speaks Arabic” was chosen by 12.3%. These numbers are very close, however, “Part of my ethnic heritage” was a first choice of more respondents, showing that a general identification with ethnic heritage may be more important than any specific need to communicate with family members. A surprisingly small number of respondents chose “Communication with Arabs” (1.3%) as an important reason, even though it is a broad reason and seems intuitively important (if you study a language, you must want to communicate with speakers of that language). Such reasoning explains what kept students from selecting this variable. In other words, its low value does not necessarily mean it was not considered an important reason but rather a preconceived notion in which communication is closely related to language learning. One respondent explained, “When I take a flight I don’t ask the pilot if he has checked the oil or the air pressure in the wheels. It goes without saying.” Religious reasons may also be grouped under ethnic heritage although the two are not necessarily related. Whereas 12.2% of the respondents selected “Read the Qur’an / religious texts,” only 2.2% chose “To be part of Muslims,” implying that more people chose general heritage factors relating to ethnicity rather than to religion. Still, some had a specific interest in studying religious texts in Arabic.

Additional Findings

In regards to other reasons within the survey, two were neglected by every respondent in the sample: “The only language class open.” and “Parents force me to study.” The fact that these were never chosen implies that students take Arabic for specific reasons rather than convenience and by their own choice rather than from outside pressure. This conclusion is consistent with studies that have shown LCTL learners to have personal reasons and/or strong interests motivating their study, whereas students of the more commonly taught languages are more likely to be continuing what they studied in high school. Arabic is rarely taught in high schools and this fact may make some college students less likely to take Arabic because they may wish to continue taking the language they began earlier. On the other hand, others may specifically want to take a different language than the one they took in high school (Moore & Lambert, 1992). (10.9% chose “Learn a different language” as their first choice). As most students were in their first semester of Arabic study, it makes sense that so few chose the reason “I have taken some Arabic” (1.8%). Rarely chosen reasons often related to a limited aspect of the language or associated culture. For example, few students chose variables relating to the Arab food, music, or the alphabet.

The reasons that students choose also have important applications to educators. Many students chose “It is required for my major” as a top reason, not only validating what many researchers have been promoting - the importance of integrating language study into the curriculum as a core course rather than as an elective, while also demonstrating that their promotion has been successful to a degree. Furthermore, the fact that culture ranked high in both measures (reasons and attitudes), even though students have a variety of reasons for studying Arabic, may imply that programs that integrate a study-abroad component may be of interest to a wide segment of the Arabic student population. Programs that combine the highest technology with travel have shown remarkable success, possibly because they appeal to different student motivations.

Summary and Conclusion

The results of this study show that a variety of motivations can play an important role in a student’s decision to learn Arabic. Whereas many students are career-oriented, others are interested in the language itself and pursue it for its academic stimulation. Still, others learn Arabic to be more knowledgeable about the culture, history, and religion of the Arab people.

Finally, there are those who feel a greater sense of national threat due to changes in the sociopolitical context and they learn the language out of patriotism. All these motivations are valid. It is safe to say that a combination of motivations leads students to learn Arabic and to learn it now.

Within the integrative orientation, an interesting finding points to respondents' perception that due to globalization and advancement in technology, the people of the world became one community who speak many languages. Some of the respondents believe that they are part of this community beyond limited identification with speakers of a specific ethno-linguistic group or identification with speakers of international languages such as English. Belonging to the wider community of the world becomes a dimension of their identity, which motivates them to learn foreign languages. This finding goes even beyond those who called to broaden the definition of integrativeness to focus on identifying with the global community of speakers of English rather than with a specific geographic and ethnolinguistic one (Yashima, 2002, 2009). This finding can also support the inner-self theory in which the process of identification, which is part of the integrative concept, embodies the internal process within the person self-concept, which motivates the learning of additional language (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda 2009, 2011; Ushioda, 2006).

This exploratory study, which highlights certain motivational categories for learning Arabic and the variables that affect them, points to several areas that could be of interest for future research. Such areas could differentiate between cultural and ethnic-heritage motivations. Further research could also include political views and economic status in an attempt to better understand who is studying Arabic. Furthermore, a more in-depth look at the economic motivators to determine potential employment fields would be helpful. Other researchers may want to compare Arabic students with students of other languages at this particular time to understand why they chose Arabic. Although this study does not attempt such a comparison, the importance of national utility to its students does imply that Arabic is indeed a special case. Arabic students are a diverse body of individuals with different reasons for choosing that language. Understanding the population of Arabic students and their reasons for choosing the language has wide sociocultural implications and is a field that requires further elaboration.

Such elaboration could include the use of demographic statistics as well as other measures of attitudes. Even though enrollment in Arabic is growing at higher levels of education, two things remain to keep in mind. First, the total number of students learning Arabic in the U.S. is still small and the educational supply cannot satisfy the need nationally. Second, students starting to learn Arabic at the college level (3–4 hours a week) for 2, 3, or 4 years cannot develop the necessary level of proficiency. Students should start their Arabic studies in high school and further develop their language proficiency at the college level.

Until Americans regard learning languages as an indispensable enterprise, language teachers must argue, continuously and vigorously, for the centrality and indisputable relevance of this area of study. In spite of the ground that has been gained, a large area remains to be conquered.

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