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Anita Amber Husen

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A New Understanding of Heritage:

A Case Study of Non-Arab Muslims in the Arabic Classroom

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Mahmoud Al-Batal

Kristen Brustad

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Anita Amber Husen, BA

Report

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Dedication

For Sally Magdy Zahran

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Abstract

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Anita Amber Husen, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Mahmoud Al-Batal

For decades, the heritage language learner has been the topic of research in the field of second language acquisition for commonly taught languages such as Spanish. However, in the field of Arabic second language acquisition, little research has been done on this learning community. This report seeks to fill this gap in scholarship by reporting the survey results of *religious heritage* language learners of Arabic, defined as non-Arab Muslim students.

This report analyzes a qualitative survey of fourteen religious heritage students of Arabic. The analysis helps characterize this community with regards to trends in previous exposure to Arabic before enrolling in university courses, motivations for learning Arabic and shifts in motivations, attitudes and preferences towards teachers, and the effect their studies has had on their personal spirituality and perceptions about their spirituality. Each section of this report presents suggestions for further research and implications on teaching and learning. Finally, I propose suggestions for curriculum development based on the results of the survey.

Given the geopolitical importance of the Middle East and the prevalence of misperceptions about the region amongst Americans, competence in Arab cultural literacies is especially timely and critically urgent. A closer look at religious heritage students of Arabic can help educators strategize the teaching of cultural literacy. For instance, religious heritage students can help their peers learn about Islam and the religious significance of Arabic. At the same time, religious heritage students in particular may benefit most from being taught about the religious diversity of the Arab world and other aspects of the rich Arab cultures to which they may not previously been exposed. By re-envisioning the role of religious heritage learners of Arabic, the hope is that educators can create curricula that effectively and efficiently convey cultural literacy to all students in the Arabic language classroom. The study of religious heritage also has potential for targeted improvement of pedagogical praxis for teaching the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing to these students.

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I. Introduction

The demand for Arabic proficiency in the United States has grown exponentially since September 11, 2001, and the subsequent military invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. This demand is real, and is affecting decisions of federal investment in teaching Arabic. As Roger Allen explained in 2007, since 9/11 “the status of Arabic in the national consciousness has been transformed almost overnight to become the number-one desideratum of the American government and its various agencies” (258). Consequently, an increasing number of students are enrolling in Arabic classes. The Modern Language Association (MLA) reports that enrollment in Arabic at US universities between 2006 and 2009 increased drastically by almost 50% (Berman). What’s more, new Arabic language programs are being instituted at small liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and high schools in record numbers, too fast to count. This momentum is growing despite the economic recession and is likely to continue given the geopolitical importance of the Arabic-speaking world, particularly after the Arab Spring.

As demand for Arabic proficiency, student enrollment, and access to Arabic language programs grow, so too do the challenges that teachers face in meeting diverse student needs. One approach to meeting students’ needs is to break down students into learning communities with similar characteristics. This paper identifies one specific community of Arabic students, Muslim university students of Arabic from non-Arab heritage, and posits learning and teaching strategies specific to the characteristics of this learning community for more efficient language acquisition. This paper presents the results of a survey that explores a small sampling of this community of learners.

II. Background

The field of second language acquisition often looks at issues specific to heritage language learners (HLL) (see Beaudrie & Ducan, Fishman, Scalera, Valdés 2000, Valdés 2005, and Web & Miller). Curricula for commonly taught foreign languages, such as Spanish and French, often offer classes specific to HLL. Research has also been done on HLL of less commonly taught languages such as Chinese (McKay & Wong), Russian (Kagan), and Japanese (Kondo-Brown). However, the field of Arabic language acquisition has only just begun research specific to heritage language learners. The first of these studies was published in *The Arabic Language in America* (1992), which includes studies that specifically isolate communities of HLL defined as *ethnic* heritage learners, i.e. Arab students, but none are exclusive and specific to *religious* heritage learners of Arabic, i.e. Muslim students (Rouchdy). Even the more recent study on HLL of Arabic in *A Handbook for Arabic Teaching Professionals* (2005) does not examine the religious heritage learners (Taha). As Sonia S’hiri pointed out, “Failure to meet the needs of Arabic heritage speakers continues to be widespread in university-level Arabic programs around the country” (2). This raises the question, how can research be done on the HLL effect that has been so widely studied in other languages before we define HLL of Arabic?

The definition of HLL in the field of second language acquisition is itself the topic of academic debate. Depending on the definition applied to HLL in the case of Arabic, the population of HLL could nearly quadruple. Muslim Arabs, who make up approximately 80 percent of all Arabs, are less than one quarter of all Muslims

worldwide as well as in the US. Moreover, the range of ethnic backgrounds of HLL could be confined to the Middle East and North Africa or extend to all corners of the globe. Inclusive definitions takes into consideration sociolinguistic factors, defined broadly as ‘personal history’ and ‘emotional and personal connection’ and ‘family relevance’ surrounding the language and the learner. One such definition is offered by John Webb, who describes a heritage language learner as “someone who has a personal, emotional connection to a language other than English. Somewhere in their personal history there is a link to that language that is important” (qtd. in Scalera 3). Another inclusive definition for heritage languages is offered by Joshua Fishman, who defines heritage languages as languages that “have a particular family relevance to the learner” (81).

These definitions include Muslims as heritage language learners of Arabic because of the relationship between the language and Islam. Since the emergence of Islam, the question of the sacredness of the Arabic language has been studied, debated and written about. According to a Pew Research Center survey in 2007 of over 1,000 Muslim Americans in the US, 86% say the Quran is the “word of God” (23). Many Muslims in this survey would seem to have a “personal” and “emotional” connection to the language, and find it important to their “personal history” and possessing “a particular family relevance.” When applying the above definitions of HLL and heritage language, many Muslim students of Arabic would be considered HLL, regardless of their ethnic heritage. This would effectively group together Muslims who are of African, African-American, Persian, Pakistani, Indian, Malaysian, and Indonesian heritage, and Muslims who converted to Islam from any background.

The other option offered in HLL studies is to use a more restrictive definition of HLL. In *Spanish for Native Speakers*, Guadalupe Valdés defines a heritage language learner as “a student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language” (1). In the context of Arabic, this definition limits HLL to ethnic Arabs. Both interpretations of HLL—the first definition that includes non-Arab Muslim students and the second that excludes them—equally fail to distinguish the unique situation that is presented by non-Arab Muslims studying Arabic.

Most of the HLL research in second language acquisition studies suggests that HLL have particular strengths and weaknesses in learning the target language (see Beaudrie & Ducan, Fishman, Kagan, Kondo-Brown, McKay & Wong, Scalera, Valdés 2000, Valdés 2005, and Webb & Miller). Many educators have developed curricula specific to HLL that take advantage of their cultural capital and learning potential to help them excel and hone in on the language skills with which they typically struggle.

However, there is a dearth of scholarship on HLL in Arabic. As Sonia S’hiri points out,

Another challenge learners and teachers of heritage Arabic face is a scarcity of resources and, until very recently, the absence of a methodology oriented toward teaching heritage learners. Failure to meet the needs of Arabic heritage speakers continues to be widespread in university-level Arabic programs around the country. (2)

As of yet, no study of non-Arab Muslim students of Arabic (henceforth NAMSA) in the US has been published. This study aims to fill this gap in scholarship. For this reason, I decided to interview NAMSA at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) in order to identify, characterize, and explore the diversity and complexity of this learning community. After a close reading of their written responses and the discussion session, this report will begin to identify their specific language learning needs and offer suggestions for curriculum development and further research to maximize learning for NAMSA and their peers.

III. Research Design

A. Research Questions and Hypotheses

This research began with a few questions and hypotheses drawn from the personal and anecdotal experience of NAMSA. The questions that guided this study can be divided into three categories:

1. What prior knowledge of Arabic do NAMSA have before enrolling in university-level Arabic courses? How can this prior knowledge facilitate language acquisition for both NAMSA and their peers?
2. What motivates NAMSA to study Arabic? Do these motivations change as students continue to study? If so, how and why?
3. Would NAMSA be interested in curricula specific to their language learning community? How do NAMSA envision an ideal curricula specific to their learning needs?

Regarding the first research questions about prior Arabic exposure, I hypothesized that NAMSA would tend to have similar prior knowledge of Quranic Arabic with a focus on recitation and pronunciation and comprehension of some religious terminologies.

Tahera Qutbuddin's historical survey of Arabic in India concluded that the overall use of Arabic was primarily religious, and served little cultural or bureaucratic function. I assumed the same would be true for non-Arab Muslims in America, and posited that their use of Arabic would have been mainly for liturgical purposes, which Qutbuddin outlined as "Qur'anic recitation, litanies (tasbih), prose prayers (du'a), formulaic expressions connected with the ritual prayer (salah), Sufi chants (dhikr), and the chanting of religious

poetry (qasida, na't, munajat, and marthiya)" (318). Qutbuddin's survey was based in India, where Muslim communities have long-established, formal religious instruction. Muslims raised in America may receive some type of structured religious instruction growing up. However, there is very little coordination of religious instruction for children between Islamic centers in the US, so I expected varying degrees of exposure to Arabic.

With regards to the second research question, I assumed that NAMSA would share similar motivations to each other before embarking on the study of Arabic at the university level. I further hypothesized that these motivations would shift from mostly religious reasons to mostly non-religious ones as their studies progress from introductory to more advanced levels of study. For instance, a NAMSA may sign up for an Arabic class with the intention of learning to understand the Quran, and during the course of her Arabic study develop an interest in living or working in the Arabic-speaking world or other facets of Arab culture. Understanding shifts in motivation can help teachers develop teaching methods that keep students motivated and encouraged to continue past introductory levels. This challenge is especially relevant to Arabic because it generally takes students more years of study in Arabic to reach a working proficiency in the language, while four semesters of more commonly taught second languages seem to suffice. As Allen explains in *The Handbook for Students of Arabic*, "In a common scale that groups languages according to the number of contact hours required to achieve advanced proficiency, Arabic falls in category 4 (together with Chinese Korean, Japanese, and Hindi), which is the highest level" (11). So, though attrition limits proficiency in all second language acquisition, Arabic is under special strain because of

the demand for higher levels of proficiency coupled with the longer time it takes to reach those levels.

My final hypothesis was that NAMSA would be interested in an accelerated first-year track when beginning university study of Arabic. I solicited opinions on an ideal curriculum in addition to asking students directly if they would sign up for such a course. Moreover, I sought out any trends or patterns in the students study habits, pedagogical preferences, or attitudes toward Arabic study and teacher preference, though I had not hypothesized what those trends or patterns would be. I assumed that, since NAMSA recognize that they have similar meta-cognitive approaches to Arabic language learning, their interest in a special class would be reaffirmed.

These hypotheses have been outlined here for the clarity of this study. Beyond simply giving clarity to test these hypotheses, articulating them is important because they are common assumptions made by NAMSA, their teachers, and their peers, and these assumptions may affect the teaching and learning of Arabic. These factors are also explored in the survey.

While my primary goal for this study was to identify an effective pedagogical praxis for teaching Arabic to NAMSA, the secondary goal was to create meta-cognitive awareness for the NAMSA community at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). To that end, the study itself was an activity that built the strategy of learner training, which is defined by Tricia Hedge as “a set of procedures or activities which raises learners’ awareness... which encourages learners to become more involved, active, and responsible in their own learning” (85). While vocalizing and defending their learning

strategies benefits my research, it may also directly help the students understand their own meta-cognitive learning processes. Ultimately, it is my hope that this survey has succeeded in awareness-building among the students surveyed.

B. Methodology

Fourteen non-Arab Muslim students taking Arabic classes at the University of Texas at Austin during the spring semester of 2009 were surveyed by the author for this study. All fourteen students started their university study of Arabic at the introductory level. Eight of the students had completed their first year of study, four had completed their second year, one student had completed two and a half years, and another had completed three years of study. The students were identified as NAMSA by their Arabic instructors, and their participation in the study was solicited via email correspondence. Their teachers were not notified of their participation in the survey and their participation did not affect their class grade. The only material compensation for participation was the free meal over which the conversation was conducted. The data gathered was threefold: written questionnaires, audio recordings, and notes taken by the researcher during the discussion. For more information on the students, see Appendix A.

The researcher met with the students in groups of four to six at restaurants near UT for a duration of one hour to 90 minutes. The students were asked to sign a consent form for the Internal Research Board (IRB) and complete a written questionnaire with some biographical information for the first few minutes. Then, the students were given a list of discussion questions and approximately ten minutes to prepare answers and take notes for discussion (see Appendix B). Using the discussion questions as a guide, they

and the researcher engaged in conversation for the remaining time, 45 to 60 minutes. An audio-recording device was introduced and the researcher reiterated the confidentiality of the survey and anonymity of reporting, and reminded the participants to keep the discussion content private. By and large, the researcher asked questions of clarification and elaboration, but refrained from offering my opinions or experience so as to avoid influencing the students' opinions.

C. Limitations

This study is the first step toward the identification and characterization of NAMSA. Because of the geographical, temporal, and financial restrictions of this study, the sample size of students is insufficient to extrapolate conclusively about NAMSA in the US as a demographic. This study adopted a qualitative rather than quantitative approach. The small-group interview format gave students the opportunity to approach the questions more holistically; they had the opportunity to clarify the intention of the question, answer it multiple times, piggy-back off of other students' ideas, critique the question's assumptions or ask and answer another question altogether. All of these scenarios occurred. Thus this qualitative survey should be viewed as a preliminary or trial run for question design for a larger, quantitative poll or survey.

The limited scope of the qualitative format may affect survey outcomes due to several factors. First, the results may be biased toward the most ambitious or articulate students because of self-selection since those students are more likely to feel comfortable or interested in participating in a small-group discussion with their peers. Additionally, there is the potential for bias in the students' reporting because of the perceived

conflicting interests of the moderator of the survey. The researcher's roles as a teaching assistant, Arabic Flagship mentor, and most significantly email announcer of Arabic-related campus events may have led to a perception that the researcher was part of the learning institution rather than a fellow student. The most likely effect of this perception is that NAMSAs students who received the email recruitment message for the survey may have initially dismissed the email after associating that email address with official announcements.

A final major source of bias is the timing of the survey. The recruitment email was sent in the last week of classes during the spring semester, a naturally busy time for students. As a result, potential participants may have been too busy to volunteer their time. Moreover, the survey meetings were held over the exam period, when students may have been exhausted, distracted, or particularly critical or negative.

D. Survey Implications

Independent of any further research or implications of this study, the most significant outcome was providing a space for confidential and critical self-reflection on the participants' unique situations as Muslim students. The process of this survey identified and isolated NAMSAs at UT, and provided them a space to reflect on their study of Arabic as it relates to their Muslim identity. As Douglas Brown indicates, with strategies-based instruction the teacher ought to ask herself, "Am I helping students to become *aware* of their own preferences, styles, strengths, and weaknesses, so that they can then take appropriate *action* in the form of strategies for better learning?" (70). The act of vocalizing inner thoughts proved useful on a psychological level, and the

opportunities for listening and sharing created a sense of solidarity, community and validation.

UT was the best location for this survey at the time because it had one of the largest and widely recognized university-level Arabic language program in the US. During the time of the study, UT had over fifty NAMSAs, the majority of whom study or have studied a second foreign language in addition to Arabic. This allowed them the unique advantage of being able to provide comparative analysis for their foreign language survey.

IV. Survey Results and Analysis

After integrating the responses from the written questionnaire and the oral discussion, five major themes emerged. These themes were chosen based on their frequency and depth of discussion, and they were reoccurring topics of discussion during each of the three meetings with students. The relationship of each theme to the research questions is explained below. Each theme is then identified with quoted examples from survey participants. Embedded in the analysis are suggestions for further research or curriculum development. The themes are:

- Sources and types of prior knowledge of Arabic.
- Motivations for learning Arabic and changes in motivations.
- Attitudes towards teachers.
- Effect of Arabic learning on sense of spirituality.

The first and second themes directly address the first and second set of research questions about sources of prior knowledge and motivations. The third theme, attitudes towards teachers helped inform recommendations for curriculum development. The final theme—effect on spirituality—emerged as an important topic to analyze since it generated the most participation from all fourteen participants. Not surprisingly, this theme also generated the most varied responses. In order to organize the variety of responses, I have set aside the counter-narrative of the non-religious Muslim for separate analysis. This theme in particular raised many interesting questions to explore in further research.

A. Sources and Types of Prior Knowledge

It is critical for language instructors to know what their students have learned and what they do not yet know. This allows instructors to organize tasks and activities for the students that incorporate previously acquired language, and allow students to fill in gaps with new information to complete the task. Having students with different levels of prior exposure to the target language poses a challenge in designing class activities.

Pragmatically, it is unavoidable to have students of different levels together in one class. Therefore teachers could potentially benefit from being able to predict the types and levels of prior exposure from specific language communities. Previously acquired language includes not only learned vocabulary and grammatical structures, but also cultural competence. Inevitably each student will have unique levels and types of previously acquired language. One major contributing factor to this uniqueness is the different experiences with Arabic that students have had outside of class. Most Muslims in the US have had some type of exposure to Arabic. The question for Arabic instructors is this: are there trends in the prior exposure of Arabic of NAMSA? If so, how can these trends be addressed in a university curriculum to more effectively instruct NAMSA and their peers?

i. Sources of Prior Arabic Exposure

The students surveyed displayed two main sources of prior linguistic knowledge that put them ahead of non-heritage students of Arabic: their heritage language and their religious instruction. Languages such as Hindi/Urdu, Gujarati, Persian, Hararic or Malay all have borrowed from the Arabic lexicon. Students who spoke or who were exposed to

these heritage languages commented that cognate words made study of vocabulary relatively easy. As a Semitic language, Hararic also displayed syntactic elements similar to Arabic like the dominance of a verb/noun instead of noun/verb sentence structure. Overall, the heritage language afforded a slight linguistic advantage at all levels of study.

One question worth exploring is the relationship between level of Arabic study and usefulness of heritage language transfer. I posit that heritage language transfer can be particularly helpful in higher levels of study. The longer a student studies Arabic, and the more comfortable the student is with the roots and patterns system of Arabic, the more the students is able to compare the nuanced meanings between languages as a result of similar roots and patterns. This survey did not have enough advanced language learners to deal with this topic; however, the impact of this linguistic advantage in the language classroom deserves further exploration.

The second type of prior knowledge displayed in the survey came from religious instruction. The largest group of students studied weekly from the age of three to six until high school. Most studied with an in-home Quran instructor, while a smaller but significant number studied once per week at a Sunday school affiliated with a mosque or Islamic center. One student only studied in middle school “with my aunt every Sunday” while another student self-studied, starting in high school, “twice a week for three years, more or less.” Another student studied religion daily, for “a couple hours” mostly in Urdu/Gujarati. Other than this student, Quranic study was in English.

The focus of this religious study was primarily the memorization and recitation of Quranic texts and prayers. Though often students learned the meaning in English, the

activity was not of translation for comprehension of Arabic; rather it was a matter of learning “the meanings while I learned the Arabic Surah [chapter in Quran].” Students reflected on the difference in religious instruction: “you are just memorizing it rather than learning grammar rules and all that.” The impact of this type of study in the classroom is minimal because, as Kristen Brustad points out,

traditional modes of education stress reading aloud as the primary classroom activity in teaching reading. But reading aloud, while serving to check and correct students’ pronunciation and word recognition, is of little aid in comprehending a text. (341)

One student who had studied since the age of six admitted that the only word she remembers from her studies is *arnab* or “rabbit.” My suspicion is that “rabbit” is a high-frequency word similar to “apple” in English because “rabbit” in Arabic begins with the first letter of the alphabet, so it often appears in alphabet-learning exercises similar to “A as in Apple.” Another student only remembered the word *umm* or “mother” as it was the student’s mother who was the instructor. Generally, students did not acquire or retain much Arabic from religious instruction. The only exception was a student who was taught the Arabic meaning along with Arabic reading of Quranic text. She explained that as a class, students would “memorize a *surah* [chapter], and translate the letters word for word to understand the meaning.”

In the case of students living in areas geographically isolated from a Muslim community, informal instruction was administered by a typically female relative like the mother or aunt. Students in larger cities attended Sunday school weekly. Students raised

in a Muslim country, on the other hand, received daily religious instruction. While the intensity of religious instruction correlated roughly to the level of advantage in the university Arabic classroom, overall the advantage was less significant than projected.

ii. Effect of Previous Arabic Exposure on Lexical Development

The advantage of religious instruction was most prominent in introductory Arabic for the first few weeks of instruction when students were learning the alphabet. After introductory Arabic, the religious students continued to see an advantage from their exposure to religious terms. Qutbuddin's historical exploration of Arabic used by Muslims in India posits one trend in their use of Arabic that is echoed by survey participants. Qutbuddin explains that words that have a more general meaning, such as *sahifa* [newspaper], *ziyarat* [visit], *qasida* [poem] and even *kitab* [book], are used with exclusively religious connotations when borrowed in Indian languages (328). One student commented that it is sometimes "hard to disassociate only a religious meaning" from words like *dhikr*, which generally means "remembering" but religiously refers to remembering God, and *ḥadath*, which generally means "to occur" or "to happen" but religiously refers to the events of the life of Prophet Muhammad. This word association suggests that a potential area for further research is learning prototypes, and the relationship between the prototypes and their conceptual categories. As Hedge asks, "Do learners acquire the meanings of prototypes more quickly than those of non-prototypes, for example?" (123). This trend may also help educators predict false cognates NAMSA typically encounter. In order to do so, further research needs to be done to compile a corpus of prototypes.

Perceptually, NAMSA describe the relationship of prior Arabic knowledge and classroom learning as one of “unlearning.” NAMSA in this survey expressed going through a process of ‘unlearning’ or ‘suppressing’ their previous Arabic exposure, whether through a heritage language or religious instruction or both, when learning Arabic in the university classroom. For instance, one student narrated a funny anecdote of the misuse of the word *gharīb*, which means “strange” in Arabic and “poor” in Urdu. Another student admitted to making “a fool of myself if it’s a false cognate.” These comments suggest that a more extensive corpus of cognates and false cognates could be useful, not only for NAMSA, but also for understanding the relationships between Arabic and other heritage languages of Muslims. This research ought to be framed in a context of “refining” rather than “unlearning” prior Arabic knowledge.

iii. Effect of Previous Arabic Exposure on Pronunciation

With both the heritage language and the religious instruction, the most prominent advantage from one or both types of exposure was pronunciation, only “if you hear it pronounced well in prayers, [then] it helps you.” In general, the students seemed to value correct pronunciation to a great degree, for it was mentioned more often than any other linguistic skill. As one student stated, “our accents are a bit better than people who haven’t been exposed to any Arabic at all.” The students overall see themselves as having a relative advantage in pronunciation.

The qualitative discussion on the pronunciation advantage raises interesting questions. The students were proud of their relative advantage, yet at the same time some of the students expressed insecurities when they are told they speak Arabic with a non-

English heritage language accent. Students who had studied in the Arab world commented that native speakers noticed they speak Arabic with a Persian or Hindi accent. Their ideological emphasis on pronunciation of Arabic may reflect the pedagogy of their religious instruction, which focused on accuracy in pronunciation.

The emphasis on pronunciation may also reflect their pride in a skill in which they have relative success. A skill that is particularly difficulty for students of Arabic at universities in the US. The difficulty of pronunciation is compounded by its psychological effect. Hedge explains, “many teachers would say that pronunciation work is one of the most difficult areas for students because awkwardness, inhibition, embarrassment, and fear of losing face tend to come strongly to the fore” (287). With the religious emphasis on proper pronunciation, and the psychological pressure to pronounce correctly, NAMSA are in a double-bind with a relative advantage in pronunciation, and an increased pressure to pronounce correctly. As educators encourage students, both NAMSA and non-NAMSA, to achieve native-like pronunciation in Arabic, it is important to recognize both possible influences from heritage languages and possible added pressure to pronounce correctly which may contribute to language learning anxiety.

Further studies on the influence of heritage language in pronunciation of Arabic for NAMSA could help bridge the gap from the relative advantage in pronunciation and achieving native-like pronunciation by anticipating common mispronunciations. As one student noted, “it takes time, you’ve been doing the wrong thing for a long time, so it takes time to fix it.” The idea of having to “fix” language input that was acquired

“incorrectly” reflects sentiments students had about “unlearning” false cognates. Both these issues could be effectively studied through comparing actual versus perceived influences that the heritage language has on learning Arabic. This survey showed evidence of a perceived effect. Both educators and students can benefit from knowing the actual influence and being aware of perceptions of influence.

Another suggestion for further study would be a comparative analysis of pronunciation of Arabic in heritage languages of NAMSA and pronunciation of Arabic in regional dialects. One student in the survey made an interesting comparison between Urdu mispronunciation and Egyptian dialect. Despite the fact that the student had not yet studied in the Arab world, she or he was familiar with Egyptian dialect, and argued that it was “easy to get away with Urdu pronunciation” of certain letters, such as “ض” (ḍ) pronounced as “ز” (z) because it mirrored the Egyptian pronunciation. Research would need to establish that this is not one isolated example, and just as building a corpus of cognates and false cognates could help NAMSA, so too could a comparative reference for phonemes.

B. Motivations for Learning Arabic and Changes in Motivations

Language teachers can best help students succeed when they understand students’ intrinsic motives for language learning. As Douglas Brown explains,

If all learners were intrinsically motivated to perform all classroom tasks, we might not even need teachers! But you can perform a great service to learners and to the overall learning process by first considering carefully the intrinsic motives

of your students and then by designing classroom tasks that feed into those intrinsic drives. (68)

Current Arabic classroom tasks do not feed into the intrinsic motives of NAMSA with organized, sustained effort. One reason is because the motives of NAMSA as a learning community have not been carefully considered. This survey attempted to understand NAMSA motives by directly asking students what motivates them.

The most common reason that motivated the students surveyed to enroll in Arabic class was to understand or be able to translate the Quran and prayer. Two students described it as “kind of weird” and “kind of annoying” to pray and not understand what they were saying. A third student took this logic further to claim, “I didn’t think I could get a lot of authentic knowledge without learning the language itself,” and many students argued that translations do not do justice to “the word of God.” I posit that this may help explain why NAMSA students come from a variety of different academic disciplines and majors; many have a religious motive for registering for Arabic that is independent of their academic trajectory at the time.

i. Changes in Motivation

However, the students’ motivations for learning Arabic changed during the course of their study. With the exception of one student whose interests became more religious, most others started off with exclusively religious motivations for learning, then shifted to other interests. A few students developed an academic interest in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, and switched majors after enrolling in Arabic. In some cases, their intellectual curiosity has also shifted their professional aspirations. As another student

stated, “I already knew the Arabic script...originally I had religious reasons. Later, it turned into political goals...working for the government or state department.” Another student admits, “I didn’t plan to take the last few years (past first year), but I just find it more interesting. I’d like to enter into diplomacy.”

One student described this shift as moving from “religious” to “cultural” when explaining that “at first I didn’t want to travel there, but now I really want to go...so it has definitely made me want to learn more about the Arab culture.” Another student explained how the motivation for learning Arabic “started off very religious then shifted to the social/cultural...so it’s gone from being a better Muslim, I guess, to making a difference.” One student described the shift as moving from “Islamic studies” to “politics.” And as their motivations for learning Arabic evolved, their interest in learning Arabic dialects grew.

ii. Motivation for Learning Dialects

Before enrolling in Arabic class, most students were not “aware of” and “didn’t understand the difference between Amiyas and Fusha.” As a result, students were initially put off by dialects. As one student stated, “At first, I was annoyed because there were all these different ways I was supposed to speak.” They admit that while learning Amiyas did not help with their original motivation for studying Arabic, their interests in the language changed. As one student articulated, “I learned that ...the whole Arab world doesn’t speak Quranic Arabic...they’ve developed their own quick easy way to talk to each other.... I didn’t like it at first because I didn’t see the point of it. I didn’t know why I should learn all these different greetings when all I needed was *al-salām ‘alaykum.*”

Since the students surveyed are all part of a program that places more focus on learning dialects than most university programs, it could be the case that learning dialects caused a greater interest in non-religious uses of Arabic. It may also be the case that growing interest in non-religious uses of Arabic created greater interest in learning dialects. Or, there may be no causal relationship between the two phenomena. On the other hand, a clear causal relationship was shown to exist between studying abroad in the Arab world and increased interest in learning dialects. All the students surveyed who had studied abroad in the Arab world expressed a clear appreciation for learning dialects. One student cautioned the group, “when you go to an Arabic speaking country you realize that you sound sort of lame when you speak Fusha.” As another student commented, “Dialects is another door that opens to other worlds.”

The exception to a growing interest in learning dialect came from one student from the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) track, who chose it because “I didn’t want to learn dialects before I learned the real thing. Dialect is not in the Quran. I wanted to stick strictly with the Quranic and then dialect if necessary.” In response, an upper-level student who still maintains goals to understand the Quran justified dialect learning with this argument:

If you think of it as one hour of studying Arabic can get you this far, then I would definitely could be better at understanding the more religious or classical Arabic...but at the same time I think I’ve gotten a good enough base that if I took a dictionary I could figure it out.

As more programs include dialect teaching in their curriculum with the greater presence of dialects in the new edition of the *Al-Kitaab* textbook series, scholars and educators need to better understand students' motivations for learning dialects, particularly as their interests in Arabic develop and evolve. This is the case for all students, NAMSA and their peers.

C. Attitudes Toward Teachers

The students surveyed had a lot to say about preferences and attitudes towards teachers. While this topic does not directly answer one of the research questions, it does help to identify common preferences amongst NAMSA, which may be useful when considering curriculum development for this learning community.

Overall, the students' preference between a native or non-native Arabic speaking teacher had no clear trend. Many had no preference as long as the teacher was "good" and "could pronounce Arabic correctly." However, many more preferred an Arab teacher, as "they have more insight on the whole thing" and a non-Arab "doesn't really understand the cultural nuances that come with saying a specific word that one would know growing up speaking that language."

The exception to this trend is students in beginning Arabic. Most first-year students preferred their non-Arab teachers because they can "bring it down to our level" since they have "gone through what we're going through right now" and "understand the frustrations that come with learning that language," so they can impart "good techniques on how to teach it to you, good memorization tricks, learning tricks." On the other hand, intermediate and advanced students expressed a preference for non-Arab teachers in the

beginning levels, but for higher levels they prefer an Arab teacher. I suspect the greater preference for an Arab teacher and greater importance given to the teacher's correct pronunciation of Arabic is an attitude unique to NAMSA, but greater quantitative research must be done to prove this assumption. These attitudes are important to document and track, particularly as the number of non-native instructors of Arabic as a foreign language is increasing. Studies about student, administration, and peer perceptions of non-native instructors should be conducted with greater depth than was done in this survey.

There was no conclusive preference for same-gender teachers. Only one female student preferred a same-gender teacher, while two other women commented that at first they thought they would have preferred a woman, but having a man "turned out fine." There was no correlation between gender preference and preference (or lack thereof) for native or non-native speakers.

D. Effect of Arabic Study on Spirituality

ii. Effect on Personal Sense of Spirituality

For the religious Muslims studying Arabic, their study of Arabic had a wide-ranging effect on their personal sense of spirituality. On one hand, some students saw no relation, explaining, "I don't see Arabic class as a religious endeavor" and "I see [Arabic study] as a separate world. My growth in spirituality and Islam have come from other factors in my life."

Others explained that they listen to religious sermons in a different way: "You're trying to sort of see what they're saying." Another student relayed an anecdote about

feeling a sense of accomplishment when listening to a religious sermon, and understanding “whole sentences in Khutba, it’s like, I don’t need the translation, I got it!...[It is] gratifying [to] know it helped so much.” Moreover, some students expressed a strong emotional sentiment attached to achieving spiritual goals through learning Arabic. One student narrates, “The Imam was reciting a *surah* and all of a sudden he’s going into a story of Isa, and it was in Arabic, and I recognized a few words from class, and that was a very spiritual experience for me because it was the first time I connected spiritually with my prayers, and so that really helped me in terms of spirituality and my standard class of Arabic affecting my religious side.” Others commented that it is “a really really amazing feeling” and “I feel pretty cool” when they understand parts of sermons or prayers.

The strongest connection between study of Arabic and spirituality was expressed by the student in the MSA track who felt as though

every true [name of religious sect withheld] learns Arabic...its almost an obligation to learn Arabic to know enough about Islam. I hold the stereotype that if you are learning Arabic then you should be more religious because you actually know what’s going on so that you should go and seek more knowledge because you know Arabic.

While this view was only expressed by one student, it may be prevalent amongst other NAMSA. It is certainly prominent in religious institutions where Arabic is taught, and it is indirectly evident in the perception of Muslim family and friends

of NAMSA. A more quantitative study needs to be done to evaluate the prevalence of this opinion.

ii. Perceptions of Others on Students Spirituality

There was no monolithic perception by others toward the students' study of Arabic, nor were there any major reactions by the students to others' reactions to them. Yet I noticed two clear trends in the reactions. The first trend was a positive reaction by others, which provided an external motivating factor for some students. Students are continuously praised for their study of Arabic at home and at the mosque. An American convert to Islam explained, "people are definitely more impressed...they take you more seriously...they believe that you're actually Muslim." Another student commented, "my dad is really proud," and another said, "people tell me that it's a good thing to take Arabic." Yet another narrated, "my mom always tells me the other mothers have their eyes on me for their sons!" The reaction was generally positive in response to a perception that the students are taking on a religious endeavor by studying Arabic.

In addition to simply being impressed, the students' Muslim friends and family encourage the student by engaging with them in Arabic. Family members ask for pronunciation help in Quran recitation, and one student who teaches at a weekly religious school commented on the effect of Arabic study in her interaction with her students: "I always correct their pronunciation and warn them of the importance of pronunciation." This comment is striking because it opens doors to the reciprocal nature of the study of Arabic and the teaching of Islam at Sunday schools. Sunday school teachers can not only benefit from the study of Arabic, but the field of Arabic pedagogy can assist teachers in

curriculum design to universalize the weekly study of Arabic by Muslim students across the US, which is generally poorly structured and inconsistent. The creation and implementation of a functioning weekly Arabic curriculum at Islamic schools is a strategic investment that will benefit not only NAMSA students who continue to learn Arabic at the university level but also the vast majority of Muslim children who do not.

The second reaction was one of mockery and sarcastic fear that the study of Arabic was going to lead the students to extreme religiosity. One student explained, “my dad will joke; he’ll ask me if I can read the Quran.” A male student who had studied Arabic abroad was warned, “don’t come back with a big beard,” and a female student was also warned, “Oh don’t go wear hijab now!” A few students remarked that this shift in perception of others was more prominent after they decided to major in Islamic studies. Both types of reactions by friends and family reveal the perception of Arabic study at university to be a religious pursuit.

iii. Counter-narrative of the Non-religious Muslim

While certainly not all the students quoted above consider themselves religious or “practicing” Muslims, identity is fluid and the nature of the survey selection and discussion seemed to bring out the strongest aspects of the students’ Muslim identity. At the same time, there were a few students who resisted the temptation to conform to the dominant narrative. Instead, they spoke candidly about their lack of religiosity to their self-identified Muslim peers and me.

One student’s reason for taking Arabic was explained as such, “My parents were almost a little hostile to Islam and religions in general, so maybe that kind of drove me to

learning Arabic.” He then explained, “I certainly got negative reactions” from choosing to study Arabic in a non-religious family. Another student articulated the difference between academic study and personal belief as such, “people think I’m more religious just because I’m taking the class, which I don’t like because you can’t judge someone’s spirituality or religiousness. And just because somebody’s taking Arabic that doesn’t make them more religious that’s just crazy... [it] doesn’t make you more or less religious just because you’re taking it academically.” These students are in a unique position to bridge the divide between “secular” and “Islamic” scholarship and between “Orientalist” and “native.”

V. Conclusion and Suggestions for Curriculum Development

Suggestions for curriculum development from the students surveyed fell roughly into two independent categories. This section articulates the students' suggestions, reads them alongside university goals for Arabic instruction, and finally offers suggestions for curriculum development that meet both student and institutional goals. The first student suggestion would require a major overhaul to current curricular methods, while the second necessitates additions to the current curriculum.

The first suggestion is to incorporate more religious texts into the Arabic language curriculum. One student complained that the course materials do not cover religious texts; having used the *Al-Kitaab* textbook series for two years, "only once in 2 years did I have a reading that was a passage from the Quran." While students admitted that reading texts such as "TV schedules or restaurant menus is more practical," they still prefer to study religious texts because "if I was studying meanings of the Quran and the Hadith...it would motivate me a lot more because I would see the fruits of my labor more immediately." Most of the students who agreed with this sentiment would be interested in taking a class with a different curriculum, exclusively for Muslims because "with Muslims students, [the teacher] wouldn't have to worry about the brainwashing aspect" when teaching Islam as a main part of the culture. However, an exclusively Islamic study of Arabic at university is problematic pragmatically and philosophically.

Pragmatically, there are several challenges in implementing such an Arabic course. First, all the Muslims students who would be interested in a special curriculum would not all have the same level of prior Arabic instruction, because there is no

universal or standard curriculum for Arabic instruction at Islamic Sunday schools. While it is hard to find a language class of more than one student that does not have varying language levels, this pragmatic problem would be magnified in a course offered exclusively to Muslim students that assumed a certain level of prior Arabic exposure. Second, the complexity of Islamic texts poses a challenge for introductory and intermediate-level Arabic students. Most Islamic texts are rich in complex grammar and poetics, rendering them inefficient texts for vocabulary building, grammar lessons or general reading comprehension exercises until more advanced levels of Arabic study.

The NAMSA surveyed were expecting to understand more of religious texts through university Arabic instruction. Instead, they could benefit from inverting their expectation: to understand more Arabic from their prior exposure to and memorization of Islamic texts. This is happening outside of class as part of students' personal devotion. Survey participants described the "amazing" and "cool" feeling from understanding religious sermons and prayers. The second suggestion of a supplemental course addressed below offers an institutional framework to bridge between the study of Arabic and Islamic texts.

Philosophically, universities are not the appropriate context for religious instruction. The academic study of religion and religious texts is fundamental to the study of the humanities. Students of Arabic need to understand Islam and the religious diversity of the Arab world in order to be culturally competent in the language. However, the goal of universities is to foster critical, reflective and comparative study. As a result, university-level Arabic class exclusively for Muslim students would be detrimental to the

cultural learning between Muslims and non-Muslims in the classroom. To recognize culture as a fifth language skill, alongside reading, writing, listening and speaking, necessitates the engagement of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Dogmatic or “brainwashing” study that presupposes certain beliefs to be true has no place at secular universities. Muslim students seeking such institutions can choose to enroll in Islamic academic institutions that excel in such instruction

The alternative is to invite NAMSA to share their knowledge of Islam with their peers in a structured way. Islam is a necessary but certainly not sufficient part of cultural literacy in Arabic. Islam only one of many religious traditions in the Arab world, and religion is only one of many aspects of culture. Nonetheless, a basic understanding of Islam is essential to understanding Arab cultures. Therefore, teaching culture is precisely the language skill for which we should alter the curricular expectations from Muslim students and invite them to “relieve the teacher of the burden of being the cultural authority” as suggested by Crawford-Lange and Lange (146). Muslim students of first- and second-year Arabic can be assigned the task of teaching the more basic lessons on Islam like the family of the Prophet Mohammad and the significance of Ramadan. Alice Ommagio suggested activities such as studying the cultural connotations of words, artifact study, hypothesis refinement and cultural mini-drama are all accessible ways for NAMSA to study and teach Islamic culture in the Arabic classroom.

If this is not feasible or the students do not feel comfortable being singled out in front of the class, then another option is to assign NAMSA additional cultural assignments on religious minorities in the Arab world. One student noted that she learned

a lot about “the religious culture...how Islam plays and how it affects the culture in the Middle East. Some countries will be really liberal and modern and others will be really conservative.” Another student stated bluntly, “I learned that not everyone in the Arab world is religious.” These remarks suggest that NAMSA have idealized preconceived notions about Islam in the Arab world. Focused study on preconceptions about Islam in the Arab World should be further explored for both NAMSA and non-heritage learners. Curricula that seek to teach these students about Arab cultures could benefit from these studies to provide all students an opportunity to clear up misconceptions and reexamine their ideologies that shape their preconceived notions.

The second suggestion by the students surveyed was to provide NAMSA a supplemental course, in addition to their regular Arabic course, in which they could study religious texts that use the new vocabulary and grammar from their main class. This would help reinforce their Arabic instruction while at the same time relating it to a religious context. Religious texts are particularly helpful for teaching morphology because the vowelizing embedded in the text provides morphological clues, whereas the short vowel diacritic utilization in non-religious texts makes the language highly lexicalized. Before embarking on this project, Kristen Brustad’s suggestion for further research is needed on the question: “how much morphology do learners need to use the root and pattern system effectively in reading for comprehension?” (351). Because the students in the class would be the self-selected, motivated students who have a serious interest in engaging religious texts, the difficulty of the texts for fourth, third, or even second-year students ought not to be discouraging. Quite the opposite, this can potentially

strengthen retention of new material by creating associative links between the new material and religious context. Brown explains, “Meaningful learning ‘subsumes’ new information into existing structures and memory systems, and the resulting associative links create stronger retention” (65).

The course could be structured as an “add-on” one-credit course for a once-per-week class. The course should be made optional for all students, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, who are interested in the study of religious text. However, unlike their regular Arabic course, this supplemental course would not be able to be full-immersion because of the challenges that classical religious texts present.

Before piloting new courses catering to the community of NAMSA, more quantitative research is needed to statistically analyze retention and attrition rates of NAMSA students. By comparing the retention rate in Arabic between NAMSA and non-heritage students, we can determine if more than 20% of NAMSA of Arabic continue their studies beyond second year, then the investment in supplemental course material and courses may be of benefit. However, if the attrition rate of NAMSA is greater than or equal to the 80% rate of all Arabic students after second year, then this raises new questions. Are most NAMSA choosing to study Arabic to fulfill university language requirements? This is hard to determine because many students may not admit this to themselves or to the surveyor. Anecdotal evidence from a conversation with a Hebrew teacher shows that most Hebrew students are of Jewish background and they chose to take Hebrew to fulfill the language requirement because they assume it will be easier

because of their prior religious instruction. Whether this is the case with NAMSA should be the subject of further research.

The idea for this survey started from my own misconceptions of Arabic study before I entered the university classroom. I was like a Persian student in the study who admitted, “I assumed my Farsi was a lot more helpful than it ended up being.” Despite the disparity between expected and actual advantage for the non-Arab Muslim student in an Arabic classroom, there are unique advantages that have yet to be thoroughly researched and documented.

Based on the findings of this report, I recommend first and foremost that scholars continue to research this unique community of Arabic learners based on suggestions discussed in this survey. Instructors of Arabic will ultimately have to find ways to accommodate this learning community’s specific needs. Hopefully this will present an opportunity to more efficiently instruct both Muslim and non-Muslim students, particularly in terms of cultural literacy. Looking ahead, my hope is that this learning community can bridge the gap between Islamic and secular institutions where Arabic is taught, so that pedagogies can benefit and work together to increase proficiency of Arabic students.

Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire Responses

1. What year are you at UT?

Twelve of the fourteen participants responded:

Year in School	Number of Students
Freshman	2
Sophomore	1
Junior	3
Senior	4
Graduate Student	1
Total	12

2. What is your major?

Middle Eastern Studies: 4; Islamic Studies: 3; Arabic: 2; Finance: 2 (both South Asian Men); 1 for each of the following: Religious Studies, History, German, Government, General Geology, Electrical Engineering, and Pre-Med

3. How long have you been studying Arabic?

All fourteen students replied to this question.

Years of Study	Number of Students
1	8
2	4
2.5	1
3	1
Total	14

4. At what level did you start learning Arabic?

All students replied to this question. All started at first-year.

5. What other languages do you speak/study and for how many years?

All fourteen students replied to this question.

Heritage languages:

Eleven self-identified as heritage speakers of a language other than English. Two identified as speakers of English as a second language.

Heritage Language	Number of Students
Hindi/Urdu	6
Gujarati	3
Persian	1
Hararic	1
Total	11

Foreign languages:

Ten students had studied another foreign language. Two of the ten had studied multiple foreign languages.

Spanish:

Nine students studied Spanish as indicated below.

Numbers of Years of Spanish Study	Number of Students
25	1
8	1
5	4
4	2
3	1
Total	9

French:

Two students studied French as indicated below.

Number of Years of French Study	Number of Students
6	1
1	1
Total	2

German:

One student studied German for five years.

6. Rank these four skills in Arabic from your strongest to weakest.

All fourteen students replied to this question. The frequency of their responses is below.

	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Strongest	3	4	3	4
Second Strongest	6	4	2	1
Second Weakest	4	3	2	5
Weakest	1	3	6	4

7. Has this always been the case?

Thirteen students responded, eight responding in the affirmative, five in the negative.

8. What changes have you noticed?

Reported in Survey Analysis

Appendix B: Discussion Questions

1. What is your ethnic background?

Growing up, how often did you have religious instruction/service?

How much of the service/ education was in Arabic?

2. Why did you decide to study Arabic?

3. Have your reasons/ motivations for studying Arabic changed? If so, why/ how?

Is there a book/teacher/class that has propelled this change?

4. Do you study with classmates?

If so, do you tend to study more with Arab students and/or Muslim non-Arab students? Have you ever felt resentment from non-Muslim classmates?

Do you think you study more in groups than your non-Muslim classmates?

Illustrate with scenarios.

5. How has studying Arabic affected your sense of spirituality/ religiosity?

6. How has studying Arabic affected others' perception of your spirituality/religiosity?

Has your learning Arabic changed your relationship with your family?

Does your family ask if you understand the Quran?

Do they ask you for translation help?

Do you ask them for translation help?

- Can you illustrate some scenarios where your study of Arabic has been mentioned in a family setting?
7. Do you feel more comfortable with a Muslim/Arab instructor?
- Male/female instructor? If so, why?
- What differences have you noticed in teaching methods?
- Do you ever felt instructors were tougher on you or had higher expectations for you because you are a Muslim?
8. Do you feel being Muslim has put you at an advantage compared to non-Muslims in learning Arabic?
- If so, in what ways culturally?
- What ways linguistically?
- What about in pronunciation/ comprehension/ conversation?
9. Did you ever feel that being Muslim put you at a disadvantage?
- Were you ever embarrassed or reluctant to participate because of your native accent in Arabic?
10. If there was a specific Arabic class for Muslim students, with an altered curriculum, would you consider taking that class?
11. If you could make some suggestions for such a curriculum, what would they be?
12. What cultural topics have you studied in the Arabic classroom that interested you the most?

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Vita

Anita Amber Husen was born and raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota. After graduating from Edina High School in 2002, she moved to Atlanta, Georgia where she enrolled at Emory University and began studying Arabic. After finishing her Bachelor of Arts at Emory University in Middle East and South Asian Studies, she worked as a community health volunteer with the Peace Corps in a rural Berber village of Morocco. She started graduate studies in Arabic in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin in 2008.

Email Address: anitahusen@gmail.com

This report was typed by the author.