

Using Technology, Literature and Guest Speakers to Raise the Cultural Awareness of Arabic Language Learners

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Abstract

Despite the recent emphasis on culture integration into Arabic language curricula, and indeed foreign language instruction in general, the nature of the effect of culture integration or, more basically, the attitudes of the learners toward such integration has remained largely unexplored (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, 2006). This study attempted to address this need by investigating the attitudes of college students toward different cultural components (including videos, short stories, Live TV news, song genres, and a guest speaker) integrated into one of their Arabic language courses and, additionally, their relationship to different demographic variables. Findings from this study suggest that the participants had positive attitudes toward the cultural components integrated in their Arabic course, and seemed to have derived many benefits from this experience. These attitudes were unrelated to demographic variables. The implications of this study are discussed.

Key words: *culture, FL pedagogy, culture-based instruction, college students, attitudes*

Introduction

Foreign language (FL) educators have long recognized the close ties between language and culture. In fact, the general goal of many FL courses is expressed in terms of the ability to communicate with people from other cultures and understand their way of life. More importantly, for many students the value of FL education derives from its promise of raising awareness of other cultures and people. Several studies have shown that students' primary incentive for taking FL courses is to know about other cultures and to interact with people from other parts of the world (e.g., Roberts, 1992; Robinson, 1978). This wide interest in culture has been recently reflected in the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (Lawrence, KS: Allen Press, 2006), which identifies competence in the target culture as a central goal of FL education.

Unfortunately, the recent emphasis on culture teaching has not materialized equally across different foreign language curricula. In the case of Arabic, for example, the shortage of appropriate material about the target culture, lack of established strategies for teaching culture, and dearth of empirical studies about the place of culture in instruction have been main limiting factors against incorporating culture into the curricula. Hence, the majority of Arabic-language classrooms are still oriented toward equipping students with "communicative competence" or "proficiency" in the target language. To this end, classroom instruction almost invariably focuses on teaching the language code, sometimes with superficial reference to the target culture and people. Thus, learners who complete advanced-level language courses after a number of years of training may find themselves unprepared to communicate effectively in a foreign community. Their ability to interact with people, to conduct business, and to understand different customs and traditions is severely hampered because of insufficient knowledge of *the living* language as shaped by the target culture.

Even in cases where some cultural elements are introduced into Arabic-language instruction, the nature of the effect of culture integration or, more basically, the attitudes of the learners toward such integration has remained largely unexplored (CARLA, 2006). Starting to understand these information

gaps was the primary purpose for this study. In particular, the study examines students' attitudes toward the inclusion of several cultural components into a course of Arabic as a Foreign Language.

Culture in Arabic language instruction

While teaching culture is a pressing need across foreign language curricula, it is more so in Arabic for several reasons. First, the notable differences between the Arab culture and Western cultures make mutual understanding based on linguistic knowledge alone not easy. Misunderstanding is likely because of the variations in the background cultural knowledge needed to interpret language exchanges. The importance of cultural knowledge becomes apparent, for example, for understanding the role of religion (particularly Islam) in daily interactions in the Arab World. During a study-abroad course in Egypt, an American student tried to pay condolences to his Arab teacher whose husband died. The student said "*Ana Aasif*," meaning "I am sorry." This sentence, as the narrator of this episode (Taha, 2006) notes, is used in the Arab culture to express regret for doing something wrong, whereas the proper expression in this situation was "*Al-baqaa' li-llah*," i.e., "Eternity is only to God." In this sense, understanding this part of the Arab culture is necessary not only for grasping basic linguistic exchanges, but also for understanding how people act and react in specific ways under specific circumstances.

In fact, language does not guarantee successful communication, nor does communication need necessarily to be linguistic. People usually communicate through different non-linguistic means, and these are often culture-specific. While in the Arab World raising eyebrow, for example, often indicates astonishment or "no," the same gesture is a flirtatious signal by men in the United States. And whereas American children are taught to look others directly in the eyes as a sign of honesty, Arab people consider direct eye contact to be rude or disrespectful, and may indicate sexual overtones with the opposite sex. In a scenario where these non-linguistic details are not observed, an American would thus "communicate" rudeness to his Arab interlocutor, and an Arab would communicate dishonesty to his American conversation partner. Because these "communicative acts" are not linked to specific linguistic messages, language learners need to recognize them through proper exposure to the target culture.

Arabic language curricula should incorporate more cultural elements given the common misrepresentation of the Arab culture and people in the West. Shaheen (2001), an internationally recognized media analyst, indicates that, due to world politics and the influence of the media, the perception of an Arab has become surrounded with erroneous ideas and unwarranted judgments. Shaheen surveyed more than 900 Hollywood movies produced over the past two decades. He documented the pervasiveness of the stereotyping of Arabs as fanatics, violent, worshippers of a 'different' god, desert-dwellers, haters of Western life, and the like. He notes that, with the exception of a few films like *Three Kings*, *The 13th Warrior*, *Part Girl*, and *Perfect Murder*, the movie industry persists in portraying the Arab culture negatively.

Following Shaheen, Wingfield and Caraman (2001) demonstrate the proliferation of similar images of the Arab culture in textbooks used in American schools. As the two researchers note, these textbooks fail to present an insider's perspective on central issues related to the Arab culture. These stereotypes may negatively influence both students' attitudes toward the target culture as well as their interactions with the native speakers. Thus, Arabic programs need to introduce a variety of cultural materials that give a reasonably accurate picture of what the target culture looks like and hence rightly prepare students for real-life interactions in the target community. Eventually, cultural awareness may foster a positive attitude toward the target culture, which in turn facilitates the acquisition of the language. Several studies have shown a strong positive relationship between language acquisition and attitudes toward the target culture (Mantle-Bromely, 1995; Kraemer, 1993; Mantle-Bromely and Miller, 1991).

The need to teach culture in Arabic language classrooms is also dictated by the linguistic landscape in the Arab World, which is characterized by existence of two main varieties: Modern Standard and Dialectal Arabic. The two varieties are in complementary distribution in terms of use and functionality. Thus, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) represents the high variety whose use is normally reserved for formal, semiformal and literary contexts, whereas Dialectal Arabic (DA) represents the low variety, which is used in informal communicative exchanges, sports, music, and some film/TV show broadcasts. Unlike MSA, Arabic dialects are not typically written, although a certain amount of literature (mainly drama and poetry but now increasingly in internet blogs) exists in some of them. It is quite

common to find both varieties used in the same discourse context or even within the same sentence. For example, in news interviews or debate shows, which have recently become a routine staple of the daily programs on pan-Arab TV networks such as Al-Jazeera and Al-'Arabiyya, it is not unusual to find the interviewer using mostly, if not exclusively, Standard Arabic, while the interviewee(s) using both Standard Arabic and the native dialect, with degree of diglossia depending on the speaker's facility with Standard Arabic.

Given this diglossic situation, proficiency in Arabic involves the command of and the ability to code switch between the two varieties based on different situational factors. However, as Alish (1997) notes, different programmatic and pedagogical constraints make the attainability of such a goal practically unrealistic in an academic setting. Hence, he, among several other experts in the field of Arabic as a Foreign Language, urges for focusing on MSA while introducing DA gradually and appropriately during the course of language study. In particular, Alish points to the importance of cultural vignettes for addressing this problem and exposing learners to the language variations that they will encounter in the target speech communities.

The question of incorporating culture into Arabic language textbooks has drawn much attention in the past two decades. In the introduction to his well-known textbook *Ahlan wa Sahlan*, Alish (2000) acknowledges the difficulty involved in teaching the Arab culture due to the diversity of cultural patterns in the Arab world, that is, the existence of several Arab 'cultures' rather than a homogeneous Arab culture. He therefore admits that "No one textbook can provide a comprehensive look at the [Arab] culture. Instead, the reading passages and the storyline maintained through the lessons in the textbook attempt to show selected aspects of Arab culture" (p. xxi). Al-Batal (1988), co-author of the other widely used *Al-Kitaab* textbook series (Kristen, Al-Batal, & Al-Tonsi, 2004), contends that "the cultural content of our textbooks, especially at the elementary level, is limited and overshadowed by the heavy emphasis on structure and grammatical accuracy" (p. 444). To avoid this deficiency, Al-Batal and his associates attempt to incorporate different cultural information in *Al-Kitaab* series. Interestingly, the cultural episodes included in this series focus primarily on the Egyptian culture. In addition, *Al-Kitaab* partially addresses the issue of diglossia by including several video segments recorded in the Egyptian dialect. Few other recent textbooks, such as *Elementary Arabic: An Integrated Approach* (Younes, 1995) and *Intermediate Arabic: An Integrated Approach* (Younes, 1998), have attempted to integrate culture and language.

The under-representation of culture in the Arabic language curricula has been a main obstacle to attaining higher levels of linguistic and cultural proficiency. Taha (2006, p. 361) correctly states that "students will do much better if they have the opportunity from the earliest stages of learning, to be exposed to Arab culture, daily interactions, and to the Arabic dialects sooner than most programs do now." The incorporation of culture into Arabic language instruction is crucial for allowing students to gain important insights into the target community and at the same time learn the culturally appropriate ways of interaction based on the tasks involved in linguistic communication.

The study

While the integration of culture into Arabic language pedagogy is gaining a growing support in the field, a considerable amount of uncertainty still surrounds the question of the place of culture in the experiences of Arabic language learners. In fact, the field of Arabic as a foreign language seems to be lacking any empirical data that supports the inclusion of culture into language instruction. More surprising still is the absence of any studies that examine students' attitudes toward the introduction of culture into the Arabic language classroom. If we are to gain a truly comprehensive and informative picture of the place of culture in Arabic-language pedagogy, we need to know how students feel about culture-enhanced instruction. This study attempted to address this need by investigating the attitudes of college students toward different cultural components integrated into one of their Arabic language courses. This study was guided by the following two questions:

1. What are students' overall attitudes toward the integration of cultural components into their Arabic language course?
2. What is the relationship between students' attitudes and the length of their language study, their level of education, and their language and cultural background?

Methodology

This was a descriptive study of an exploratory nature. The study examined the attitudes of college students enrolled in two sections of an intermediate Arabic language course at a large Midwestern university in the United States. Both sections had the same instructor. Both groups covered the same course material, and both had exposure to the same cultural material. The general goal of the course was to enhance students' language proficiency in Arabic as a Foreign Language. The course was the fourth in a six-course sequence of Arabic language courses offered by the University's Department of Linguistics.

Out of a total of 32 students participating in this study, twenty-four (75%) were male and eight (25%) were female. More than half of the students (N=19) were in their fourth semester of Arabic learning. The remaining students were in their first (N=2), second (N=3), third (N=6), fifth (N=1) or sixth (N=1) semesters. The majority of the students (N=26) have finished their high school, and the rest (N=6) have completed their bachelor's degree as well. Most of the participants (N=21) came from an American non-heritage background. The rest were either Arabic heritage students (N=8) or native speakers of Arabic (N=3)¹. It is worth mentioning that the same students took a previous course in the sequence with the same instructor without being exposed explicitly to cultural elements. Given this fact, the results may reflect a possible change in the students' experience between the two consecutive courses.

Table 1: Summary of students' characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	24	75%
	Female	8	25%
Length of Study	1 semester	2	6.6%
	2 semesters	3	9.4%
	3 semesters	6	18.8%
	4 semesters	19	59.4%
	5 semesters	1	3.1%
	6 semesters	1	3.1%
	More than 6 semesters	0	0%
Education	High School	26	81.25%
	Bachelor's	6	18.75%
	Master's	0	0
	Doctorate	0	0
Language Background	Native speaker of Arabic	3	9.4%
	Arabic heritage student	8	25.0%
	Non-heritage student	21	65.6%

¹ "Heritage students" in our Program are those who were born in the United States to Arab parents. As for the "native speakers," the study involved three of them and these three are US citizens who were born in the Arab World and moved to the States in early childhood. Thus, both of these groups have been exposed for the major part of their lives to the American culture. Their exposure to the Arab culture is expected to be minimal compared to "international Arab students", that is, those coming from the Arab World for study.

The culture materials introduced in this course were:

- *Five videos*: the videos introduced in this course focused on different cultural aspects of the Arab World, including family (*Arab Diaries*, 2000: a five-part documentary series about contemporary life across the Arab world: birth, youth, love and marriage, work, and home), history (*Arabian Seafarers*, 1993: a documentary tracing one of the oldest Arab civilizations and its influence on East Africa, Sri Lanka, and India), religion (*Islam, Empire of Faith, part I*, 2001: a documentary about the rise and growth of Islam throughout the Arab world), and social life (*Terrorism and Barbeque*, 2002: an Egyptian socio-political movie about different aspects of contemporary Arab World; *Buq'at Dhaw', Episode 13*, 2003: a Syrian comic series about different social issues in the Arab World). Three of these videos, namely *Arab Diaries*, *Terrorism and Barbeque*, and *Buq'at Dhaw'*, were presented in the Palestinian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Syrian, and Egyptian dialects. Except for *Buq'at Dhaw'*, English subtitles were provided for these videos.
- *Four short stories*: the short stories were mainly folktales and children stories (see Appendix 2). According to Pesola (1991), folktales and children's story are ideally suited for early FL classes because of the simplicity of their language and their richness with cultural information.
- *Live TV news*: news broadcasts (through live TV segments) from four Arab countries (including Tunisia, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia) were watched and discussed. The broadcasts were run directly from the internet, and they contained a mixture of both Modern Standard and Dialectical Arabic usage.
- *Song/music types*: five song clips representing the main Arabic song/music types (folklore song, terza rima, national song, sufi song, and modern song) were presented in one of the culture sessions. All of these songs were recorded on a VCD (Video CD). According to Jolly (1975, p. 11), songs possess both "the communicative aspect of the language and the entertainment aspect of music." Besides, because they are often tied to emotions and ideas, songs become "a direct venue to the basic values of the culture" (p. 14).
- *Guest speaker*: A guest speaker (a female Egyptian novelist and short story writer, who was visiting the United States) was invited to present about women in the Arab culture. The guest speaker presented a feminist perspective on women's status in the Arab World (in particular their education, family roles, and work). During and after the presentation, students interacted with the guest speaker in Standard Arabic and asked questions related to the topic of the presentation.

The cultural units were introduced to the students during the lab sessions of the course, which were held on Tuesday of every week throughout the semester. The lab hosting this session had an instructor's station (VCR, DVD player, and projector) and a computer. Each culture session started either with brainstorming about the topic or a simple introduction to it (about 3 minutes). All students were then given a sheet that lists the title of the culture unit as well as the vocabulary essential for understanding the culture presentation. Then, the new vocabulary items were practiced (about 7 minutes). The culture presentation usually took about 30 minutes. Following the culture presentation was a brief reinforcing discussion of themes, main ideas, or cultural information learned (about 8 minutes).

The culture sessions involved almost the same amount of study as the regular classes in terms of new vocabulary, intellectual involvement, and preparation. Moreover, student learning of the cultural materials was assessed through the regular classroom assessment techniques, including quizzes, midterm and final. The following is a sample fill-in-the-blanks passage used in one of the quizzes to assess students' learning of the materials introduced in the video *Arabian Seafarers*:

Fill in the blanks with APPROPRIATE words:

كان البحارة العرب على متن السفن إلى بلاد عديدة، و كانوا معهم بضائع مختلفة. و يبدو أنه كان هناك
..... قديمة على سواحل شبه الجزيرة العربية. كما اكتشف الباحثون أنه كان هناك مدن كبيرة من خلال التي وجدها
في تلك المناطق.

[Arab seafarers used to... onboard ships to many countries, and they used to... with them different goods. It seems that there were ancient... on the coasts of the Arabian Peninsula. Researchers have also discovered that there were big cities through... that they found in those areas.]².

The above passage was meant to assess students' comprehension of some main ideas learned in the cultural presentation as well as to check their grasp of the pertinent vocabulary. In some cases, students were asked to summarize reading passages the comprehension of which required being familiar with certain cultural information. Likewise, vocabulary questions (odd-man-out, word-matching, etc.) included words learned during the culture sessions.

Toward the end of the course, the students were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of 21, Likert-type items and one open-ended item about their attitudes toward the culture part of the course. The questionnaire consisted of three subscales: Affective (items 1-4), Cognitive (items 5-17), and Behavioral (items 18-21). In this study, these three constructs referred respectively to (a) students' emotional reaction (i.e., liking) to the cultural components in the course, (b) their fact-based thoughts about the cultural components, and (c) their overt behavior directed toward the components (Zimbardo, Ebbesen & Maslach, 1977). Additional information about students' length of language study, education level, and language-culture background was collected. These variables were quantified by mean scores on three items. The responses to all three items were treated separately as descriptive information that was correlated with the attitudes toward the cultural components.

Data analysis and results

Research Question One: Students' Attitudes toward the cultural components

The data were analyzed via SPSS.14 statistical package. Descriptive statistics were used to describe and summarize the properties of the data collected from the respondents. Descriptive statistics consisted mainly of mean scores and frequency percentages. The attitude toward the cultural components was represented by a mean score on a 5-point scale, where 5 (Strongly Agree) represents the maximum score of the scale and 1 (Strongly Disagree) represents the minimum score. Table 2 illustrates the mean scores of individual items on the Attitude Scale.

Table 2: Mean scores of individual items on the attitude scale

N	Student's Attitudes	Mean
1.	I enjoyed the culture part of this course.	4.56
2.	*The culture part of this course made my life in the classroom very difficult.	1.28
3.	It was interesting to know some cultural facts about Arabic language and people.	4.68
4.	*I prefer language courses that focus on language alone to those that include cultural elements.	1.72
5.	The culture elements were useful learning experiences.	4.4
6.	I think that the cultural information introduced in this class has provided me with a better understanding of the Arabic culture.	4.28
7.	The course has had a positive impact on my attitude toward Arabic culture.	4.31
8.	*Learning about different genres of Arabic music was boring.	1.74
9.	Reading the short stories helped increase my vocabulary repertoire.	4.1
10.	Reading the short stories has enhanced my reading ability in Arabic.	4.09
11.	*Listening to the Live TV news was of no benefit for me at all.	1.97

² No translation was provided in the original test.

12. The culture components helped me recognize language varieties (dialects) within Arabic culture.	4.19
13. *I learned nothing from the guest speaker.	2.48
14. The videos helped me understand different aspects about the Arabic culture.	4.28
15. Through the videos, I was able to recognize some instances of non-verbal communication (e.g., gesture, etc.) in Arabic culture.	4.06
16. *The videos about Arabic culture and history were just a waste of time.	1.44
17. Knowing about the target culture helped me understand better the context of the target language.	4.09
18. Some culture elements should be part of every language classroom.	4.37
19. *I won't take any class that has culture components.	1.25
20. I would like to see cultural components in my future language classes.	4.56
21. This class has encouraged me to take further classes about Arabic culture	4.28

SD = Strongly Disagree (1), D = Disagree (2), N = Neutral (3), A = Agree (4), SA = Strongly Agree (5)

Note: * polarity reversed on these items

In general, participants' responses to the 21 Likert-type items on the Attitude Scale fell between positive and highly positive (mean = 4.30, S.D. = 0.29). The respondents' positive attitudes were evident within the affective (mean = 4.56), cognitive (mean = 4.17) and behavioral (mean = 4.49) domains (see Table 3). Ninety-four point five percent (94.5%) of the respondents had highly positive (63.0%) or positive (31.5%) affect toward the cultural components introduced in the course. These respondents reported that they enjoyed the culture part of this course and were interested in knowing some cultural facts about the Arabic language and people. When responding to the negatively stated items, the majority of them indicated that the culture part of this course did not make their lives in the classroom difficult and that they do not prefer language courses that focus on language alone to those that include cultural elements.

Within the cognitive domain, most of the respondents strongly agreed (40.4%) or agreed (41.8%) that the culture elements have provided them with a better understanding of the Arabic culture, helped them recognize varieties (dialects) within the Arabic language, aided them in understanding better the context of the target language, and were overall useful learning experiences. Moreover, most of them indicated that the course has had a positive impact on their attitudes toward the Arabic culture. Insofar as individual cultural components were concerned, the respondents indicated that the short stories helped increase their vocabulary repertoire and enhance their reading ability in Arabic. They also felt that the videos helped them understand different aspects of the Arabic culture and improved their ability to recognize some instances of non-verbal communication (e.g., gesture). Lastly, most of the participants indicated that they have benefited from learning about different types of Arabic songs and the Live TV news as well as from the guest speaker.

Within the behavioral domain, the majority of the respondents expressed highly positive (48.8%) or positive (37.1%) behavioral intentions toward the integration of the cultural components. Thus, they indicated their willingness to take further classes about Arabic culture. Besides, most of them felt that some culture elements should be part of every language classroom and that they would like to see cultural components in their future language classes.

The range of respondents' mean scores was between 4.75 and 3.52. Participants responded most favorably to item 19 (mean=4.75), and least favorably to item 13 (mean=3.52).

Table 3: Distribution of mean scores on the attitude scale

Scale	Percent (%)					Mean	S.D.
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
Affect	0.0	1.6	3.9	31.5	63.0	4.56	0.65
Cognition	1.0	3.9	12.9	41.8	40.4	4.17	0.86
Behavior	0.0	1.6	9.5	27.0	61.9	4.49	0.74
Overall Attitude	0.6	3.0	10.5	37.1	48.8	4.30	0.29

SD = Strongly Disagree (1), D = Disagree (2), N = Neutral (3), A = Agree (4), SA = Strongly Agree (5)

Research Question Two: Relationship between Attitudes and length of language study, educational level, and language-culture background.

Spearman Rank Order correlations were used to determine the relationship between the interval dependent variable (i.e., students' attitudes) and the ordinal independent variables (i.e., length of language study & education level), whereas Pearson's correlation was used to determine the relationship between the dependent variable and the nominal independent variables (i.e., language-culture background). For the latter correlation, the independent variable was dichotomized into "native-and-heritage speakers" versus "other." By convention, an alpha level of .05 was established *a priori* for determining statistical significance. Prior to conducting the analysis, the scoring of all negatively stated items was reversed. Table 4 illustrates a summary of the correlation matrix of the independent variables and attitudes.

Table 4: Summary of the Correlation Matrix of Independent Variables and Attitudes

Variable correlated with Attitudes	d.f.	rs/r	p-value
Length of L2 study	30	.13	.48
Educational Level	30	.15	.42
Language-Culture background	30	.21	.25

As Table 4 demonstrates, there was no relationship between students' attitudes toward the cultural material introduced in this class and each of the independent variables, including the length of their language study ($r_s = .13, p > .05$), education level ($r_s = .15, p > .05$), or language-culture background ($r = .21, p > .05$).

Discussion

The last two decades have witnessed increased attention to the importance of culture in Arabic language curricula as well as mounting interest in incorporating different cultural elements into regular Arabic language instruction. These developments are understandable not only because knowledge of the language code does not in itself guarantee successful communication, but also because language does not exist independent of culture. This is particularly true of the Arabic language given the fact that most daily interactions in the Arab World are carried out using the local, typically 'non-written' dialects. The present study shed some light on students' attitudes toward the integration of different cultural elements into their Arabic language course and the relationship of these attitudes to the students' characteristics.

Findings from this research suggest that the participants had positive attitudes toward the cultural components integrated in their Arabic language course. The respondents' positive attitudes were evident within the affective, cognitive and behavioral domains. Such enthusiasm for culture corroborates

the common contention that the appeal of FL education for many students lies in increasing their awareness of other cultures and people. This finding also supports and extends the several studies showing that students' primary incentive for taking FL courses is to understand other cultures and interact with the native people (e.g., Roberts, 1992; Robinson, 1978).

In addition to expressing interest in the culture part of the course, the respondents seemed to have derived many benefits from this experience. For example, students reported gaining a better understanding of the Arabic culture as a result of their exposure to the new cultural information. No doubt, cultural understanding is in itself a valuable goal of FL education, but it is also a gateway to successful communication and interaction with the target community. Increasing familiarity with the target culture enables the learner to instigate feelings of trust and develop personal rapport with the local people. The learner also gains social and psychological advantages with increased awareness of the subtleties of the culture. On the other hand, focusing on the language code without knowing enough about the culture in which it operates can pose linguistic and cultural difficulties that may curtail FL learners' ability to interact with the native speakers.

Further, the respondents indicated that the cultural components provided them with better insights into the context of the target language. Understanding the cultural context of language exchanges means "knowing what is appropriate to say to whom, and in what situations, and it means understanding the beliefs and values represented by the various forms and usages of the language" (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003, p. 2). FL professionals generally agree that the ability to produce language utterances and to translate them is insufficient unless complemented by knowledge of the proper contexts in which these utterances are used. All communicative actions are in fact embedded in some context without which language forms and utterances become meaningless. Because language is born of societal interactions and situated in a socio-cultural context, knowledge of this context is crucial for decoding most messages.

Another advantage reported by the participants in this study is the exposure to formal and informal language varieties. Because Arabic is a diglossic language consisting of two main varieties commonly known as Standard and Colloquial, proficiency in Arabic necessitates enough exposure to different real-life situations where this diglossic situation is displayed. While an equal focus on the two varieties with the aim of producing native-like speakers is unrealistic and impractical in a classroom setting (given the different limitations imposed by the opportunities to use the language), a basic familiarity with this diglossic situation and its functionality in real-life situations is an important step toward a greater command of the language and better understanding of the culture. The value of the introduction of culture lies in providing a framework for exposure to these language varieties in a range of formal and informal settings.

Of particular interest in this research is the respondents' assertion that the course had a positive impact on their attitudes toward the Arabic culture. Brooks (1968) argues that any study of culture is meaningless unless it leads to a better appreciation of fellow humans beings. In fact, Thanasoulas (2001) considers "a change in attitudes toward one's own or another culture" an integral component of foreign language education. Not only do positive attitudes toward the target culture lead to empathy for the speakers of the language, but they also facilitate the acquisition of the language itself. No wonder, many FL experts are nowadays calling attention to the importance of fostering positive attitudes toward the target culture, especially in beginning FL classes (Robinson, 1978; Thanasoulas, 2001; Peterson & Coltrane, 2003).

It is noteworthy that the students had positive attitudes toward each single cultural element introduced in this course, including the short stories, videos, songs, Live TV news, and guest speaker. Not only that, but they deemed each beneficial to their overall language learning and/or cultural understanding. For example, the short stories were viewed as instrumental for augmenting students' vocabulary repertoire and enhancing their reading ability. This suggests that the advantages of literary texts used in FL courses go beyond advancing cultural understanding to include different "language" skills. The fact that the students have appreciated these advantages necessitates re-visiting the role of literature in FL education and its possibilities for FL pedagogy, especially in the light of the current disposition against its use by most FL teachers (see Belcher & Hirvela, 2000).

Likewise, the videos were considered helpful for understanding different aspects of the Arabic culture and for providing chances to recognize some instances of non-verbal communication (e.g., gesture). This finding highlights the value of videos in depicting cultural issues that are not immediately available in texts. At the same time, it points to one of the merits of modern instructional technologies and

their potential for the field of L2 acquisition. A large number of studies have shown a positive impact of modern technologies on students' cultural understating and/or L2 acquisition (e.g., Herron, Dubreil, Cole & Corrie, 2000; Herron, Durbreil, Corrie, & Cole, 2002; Martinez-Gibson, 1998).

Similar positive attitudes were expressed toward the live TV news, guest speaker, and songs. Such optimism suggests that cultural information, regardless of its type, resembles a valuable learning experience for students, provided that it is introduced in a meaningful way, i.e., in a way that combines appeal to students' interests and positive contribution to the curriculum. Students' positive attitudes may also reflect their eagerness to increase their knowledge of, and contact with, the target culture through different veins. Unsurprisingly, increasing one's awareness of other cultures has often been a primary goal and premise of FL education.

An additional finding that deserves attention is the participants' expressed desire to take further classes about the Arabic culture. This finding is significant because it shows that the inclusion of cultural components into Arabic courses increases the students' interests in the target culture and further urges them to explore the target culture on their own. Thus, the effect of the culture part of the course extends beyond the language classroom. Secondly, most of the students felt that some culture elements should be part of every language classroom and that they would like to see cultural components in their future language classes. This finding indicates that culture integration into Arabic courses is currently a student demand as well as a teacher demand.

Lastly, the findings showed that students' positive attitudes toward the cultural components were not related to the length of their language learning, education level, or language-culture background. The fact that the interest in learning about the target culture was unrelated to demographic variables represents another evidence of the importance of culture for a wide array of students. At the same time, it provides greater inspiration for Arabic language teachers to incorporate culture into their curricula.

Conclusion

The study has different implications for Arabic language pedagogy and curriculum development. First, culture is not, and should not be, a simple add-on to Arabic language instruction, but an integral part of the curriculum to be taught along with the language. That is, Arabic language teachers should create an overall curriculum design with culture units built into it. A first step toward achieving any cross-cultural goals, however, is the recognition that cultural understanding is not simply a means to the ends of mastering the language code but an end in itself. With this conception in mind, teachers need initially to foster an atmosphere that demonstrates the importance, indeed the indispensability, of culture for all communicative goals. Then, they should try to find relevant cultural material and create contexts for culture integration in their regular language classrooms.

Teaching culture should focus not merely on the "visible" details of the Arab World, such as geography, currency, clothing and food, but also on the hidden aspects of the Arabic culture, including beliefs, values, and customs. This type of information is necessary to equip students with both a better understanding of a culture that is substantially different from their own and the background knowledge needed to interpret language exchanges. Exposure to different varieties of Arabic, however limited, is also necessary to prepare students for the diglossic situation they are very likely to encounter in the target speech communities.

Providing students with multiple channels of contact with the target culture serves many pedagogical purposes. One, culture teaching meets the interests of many students in studying the target language. Two, it presents a meaningful educational experience for promoting insights into another culture, its complexities, and its links to language. Three, it promotes cultural understanding so essential for successful communication with and empathy for people from another part of the globe. Four, it is instrumental for creating positive attitudes toward the target culture, which in turn facilitate the acquisition of L2. Five, it enhances students' ability to consider context by selecting appropriate language in the communicative act. Six, it provides a cultural setting for the study of language varieties and their usage in different formal and informal settings.

To help students reap these benefits, teachers themselves have to be culturally well-informed. Because any measure of communicative competence requires dealing with culture and because cultural instruction should be purposeful and meaningful (Seelye, 1974), teachers should not merely possess

cultural competence, but also know how to translate it into curriculum objectives. Besides, they should locate proper cultural materials and the best strategies to put them into effect. Possible options that the current study has identified include modern audio-visual media, literary texts, songs, live TV broadcasts, and guest speakers. By utilizing these and other available cultural resources, teachers can convey the cultural understanding necessary for successful communication and interaction in the Arabic language.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the current study is a preliminary step in investigating the place of culture in Arabic-language learners' experiences. In the field of Arabic as a Foreign Language, empirical research with this focus has not yet been done, even though a growing body of literature has addressed the question of integrating culture into Arabic language curricula. Future research should continue in this vein to produce more knowledge about culture learning in Arabic language classrooms. Such studies may consider changing the cultural materials, sampling procedures, or data collection methods utilized in the current study. Future studies could also explore the impact of different cultural elements on the cultural proficiency of Arabic language learners through quantifiable assessment procedures.

The study utilized multiple cultural elements to address students' different interests and learning styles as well as to maximize the benefits derived from the relevant cultural materials available at the University. Future research may focus on a single cultural component (e.g., videos) and examine its impact on students' attitudes and cultural awareness. In this way, the contribution of individual cultural items to students' attitudes can be assessed. Likewise, the study involved a mixed sample, including non-native, heritage and native speakers of Arabic. Whenever a larger number of participants exist these groups could be studied separately. A series of studies is in fact needed to help us determine not only the relevance and position of culture in Arabic language curricula, but also the best ways to incorporate various cultural materials into our everyday instructional practices.

Notes

1. "Heritage students" in our Program are those who were born in the United States to Arab parents. As for the "native speakers," the study involved three of them and these three are US citizens who were born in the Arab World and moved to the States in early childhood. Thus, both of these groups have been exposed for the major part of their lives to the American culture. Their exposure to the Arab culture is expected to be minimal compared to "international Arab students", that is, those coming from the Arab World for study.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire Instrument

Attitudes toward Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom

General Instructions: The purpose of this questionnaire is to examine your attitudes toward the introduction of cultural components in the regular language classroom. The questionnaire consists of two sections. Each section begins with some directions pertaining to that part only. As you begin each section, please read the directions carefully and provide your responses candidly in the format requested.

<i>Section (1): Instructions: Please indicate your reaction to each of the following statements by circling the number that represents your level of agreement or disagreement with it. Make sure to respond to every statement.</i>		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1.	I enjoyed the culture part of this course.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	*The culture part of this course made my life in the classroom very difficult.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	It was interesting to know some cultural facts about Arabic language and people.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	*I prefer language courses that focus on language alone to those that include cultural elements.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	The culture elements were useful learning experiences.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I think that the cultural information introduced in this class has provided me with a better understanding of the Arabic culture.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	The course has had a positive impact on my attitude toward Arabic culture.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	*Learning about different genres of Arabic music was boring.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Reading the short stories helped increase my vocabulary repertoire.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Reading the short stories has enhanced my reading ability in Arabic.	1	2	3	4	5

11.	*Listening to the Live TV news was of no benefit for me at all.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	The culture components helped me recognize language varieties (dialects) within Arabic culture.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	*I learned nothing from the guest speaker.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	The videos helped me understand different aspects about the Arabic culture.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	Through the videos, I was able to recognize some instances of non-verbal communication (e.g., gesture, etc.) in Arabic culture.	1	2	3	4	5
16.	*The videos about Arabic culture and history were just a waste of time.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	Knowing about the target culture helped me understand better the context of the target language.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	Some culture elements should be part of every language classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
19.	*I won't take any class that has culture components.	1	2	3	4	5
20.	I would like to see cultural components in my future language classes.	1	2	3	4	5
21.	This class has encouraged me to take further classes about Arabic culture.	1	2	3	4	5
22.	Other comments regarding the culture part of this course. Please write them below:					

Section (2) Instructions: Please indicate your response to the following questions by checking the appropriate boxes:

1.	Including the current semester, how many semesters have you been receiving Arabic language instruction? <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> More than 6
2.	What is your highest completed academic degree ? <input type="checkbox"/> high school <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelors <input type="checkbox"/> Master's <input type="checkbox"/> Doctorate
3.	Which of these categories describes best your language background ? <input type="checkbox"/> Native speaker of Arabic <input type="checkbox"/> Arabic heritage student <input type="checkbox"/> Non-heritage student

Thank you so much for your responses

Appendix 2

Cultural Materials

- 'Aattif, A. (2003). Hulm Al-Malik [The dream of the king]. *Baassim*, 16(813), 20-21.
- Arab Diaries [videorecording] (2000). Brooklyn, NY: First Run/Icarus Films.
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