ALTERNATIVES TO LITERATURE COURSES FOR ADVANCED HERITAGE LANGUAGE STUDENTS: THE CASE OF ARABIC IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Following traditional course offerings, many colleges provide advanced proficiency students with literature courses. This paper calls for alternative courses for native speakers and advanced heritage speakers of Arabic; in addition to literature courses, it proposes a variety of language for specific purposes (LSP) or content-based instruction (CBI) courses integrating content-based choices in line with students' heterogeneous needs and interests and meeting their needs to use both dialect and standard discourse. Parallel to literature courses, LSP/CBI courses can potentially enhance community college students' academic achievement by preparing them for transfer to senior colleges and for using their cultural and language skills in their future careers.

Keywords: Arabic, community college, content-based instruction, heritage language students, languages, literature, teaching

Most students taking Arabic classes in the community college where I teach are advanced proficiency heritage speakers. At this level, the college's course offerings are limited to Arabic literature, but it is not clear that such courses best meet their students' academic and professional needs. This paper investigates alternatives to literature courses for advanced heritage speakers of Arabic at this community college. The following questions guided the research: What makes a language course relevant to advanced heritage speakers? What type of courses might best meet new immigrants' or advanced heritage students' academic and professional needs?

The investigation is based on a questionnaire administered to students who were placed in Arabic literature courses, a group interview with selected students, and college data. After examining the conflicting definitions of heritage learners of Arabic, I discuss the research findings and make some suggestions for alternative curricula. Although literature courses are definitely relevant and can potentially enhance the academic and professional careers of these students, I argue that advanced heritage language speakers also need wider options of content-based instruction aiming to teach skills that can be applied beyond college.

The Heterogeneity of Heritage Language Speakers

While the expression "native speakers" is self-explanatory, who are heritage learners or speakers? What are the characteristics of heritage learners or speakers of Arabic?

The two main aspects of heritage learning and speaking identification are proficiency and affiliation. Valdés (2001) describes a heritage learner as "a language student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or at least understands the [heritage] language, and who is to some degree bilingual in that language and in English" (p. 38)—the most currently recognized definition. For Carreira (2004), heritage language learners (HLLs) are students whose identity and/or linguistic needs

differ from those of second language learners by virtue of having a family background in the heritage language or culture. HLLs are often differentiated as those who identify culturally with the heritage language but don't use it at home, in contrast to HL speakers, who use the language at home (Valdés, 2001). HLLs' language proficiency is more complicated than that of HL speakers; it is influenced by factors such as age and length of exposure to the HL, family exposure, social and community networks, links with the country of origin, and formal instruction; their cultural connection to the language is what makes them HLLs.

Just as there is a range of HLLs, there are different types of heritage speakers. Typically, HL students are native speakers of a nonstandard dialect, with linguistic, communicative, and cultural lacunae (Kagan & Dillon, 2003) and are often aware of deficits in their HL proficiency. In the case of Arabic, the definition of heritage speakers is problematic. Research on HL learners of Arabic has dealt primarily with the motivations of learners (Husseinali, 2006) or the linguistic features of Arabic (Benmamoun, Montrul, & Polinsky, 2010); the HL is not necessarily the language used at home or in familial contexts. Such, for instance, is the case of Muslim learners from West Africa and Southeast Asia who study Arabic for religious purposes: They can often read the Koran but do not typically speak any of the colloquial Arabic variations. Therefore, defining oneself as a HL learner often depends on identity orientation rather than linguistic proficiency (Kondo-Brown, 2003), an affiliation that leads Carreira (2004) to conclude that a definition of HL learners must take into consideration "identity, language, and family background" (p. 18).

Indeed, students of Arab descent (Christian and Muslim) live in a diglossic situation, which complicates the teaching of Arabic as a heritage language. Diglossia implies a conflict of prestige between colloquial (dialect) Arabic and modern standard Arabic (MSA). Accordingly, students cannot use various dialects spoken at home for academic and/or professional purposes because the dialects are associated with low prestige and informal communication, and are not commonly written (Maamouri, 1998). Instead, students are required to study MSA, which is associated with literacy and higher education (Husseinali, 2006).[1]

Consequently, there is a need to re-examine the terminology used to describe students grouped under the umbrella of Arabic heritage speakers. Temples (2013) suggests a distinction between heritage learners and learners with a heritage motivation; Shiri (2007) advises against the misuse of terminology: For her, calling Arabic dialect speakers heritage speakers in a classroom that teaches MSA is not only incorrect but pedagogically misleading. I agree with Shiri that heritage speakers of Arabic dialects are not, *stricto sensu*, heritage speakers of MSA but of their own dialect. As no one in the world speaks MSA as a mother tongue, students who speak or understand Arabic dialects and who study MSA should be perceived as students taking a sister language (dialect), not a heritage language. They have the advantages and challenges of speakers of sister languages, not those of heritage language speakers, who show considerable variation in their linguistic competence (Kondo-Brown, 2003; Polinsky & Kagan, 2007).

Students who come into an Arabic literature course are already speaking various colloquial Arabic forms, and have all been exposed to MSA in a strictly formal or academic setting. In this context, what alternatives should we consider for these specific students? Which courses are more likely to enhance their academic achievement by preparing them to transfer to senior colleges and use their cultural and language skills in their future careers?

Research Context

LaGuardia Community College includes 20,000 full-time students from 150 different countries and 96 different languages.[2] The Modern Languages and Literatures program of the college offers language courses in a wide range of proficiency levels and literature courses in the target languages for advanced heritage and native speakers. As we see in Table 1, the vast majority of students of Arab descent are American-born or recent immigrants from Egypt, Yemen, Israel/Palestine, Algeria, or Morocco. Students who enroll in a modern Arabic literature course taught in Arabic reflect the diversity described by Valdés

(2001). They have been raised in non-English-speaking homes, have receptive or productive HL skills, and are to some extent bilingual.

Table 1

Numbers of Students Born in Arabic-Speaking Countries

Country of Birth	FALL 2013	SPRING 2013	FALL 2012	SPRING 2012	FALL 2011
ALGERIA	14	19	17	19	17
BAHRAIN	0	2	2	2	2
EGYPT	85	83	79	97	95
IRAQ	5	8	9	7	8
ISRAEL	21	24	23	21	25
KUWAIT	2	0	0	0	0
LEBANON	8	7	9	10	10
LIBYA	0	0	0	0	0
MAURITANIA	0	1	0	0	0
MOROCCO	70	72	79	87	81
OMAN	0	0	0	0	0
SAUDI ARABIA	8	6	5	5	6
SUDAN	4	4	3	1	2
SYRIA	0	2	2	3	2
TUNISIA	5	3	3	5	5
YEMEN	17	23	20	26	21
Totals	**239**	**254**	**251**	**283**	**274**
Total Enrollment	20,193	20,761	19,397	18,216	18,623
Percent	1.2%	1.2%	1.3%	1.6%	1.5%

The advanced heritage speakers were born in one of the countries of the Middle East and North Africa and have often received their formal schooling in Arabic in their homeland, where they completed at least part of their middle schooling. Some of them have completed high school and another good proportion have attended some college in their native country.

Before enrolling in the course, the students take a mandatory placement test to determine if they are eligible to take the literature course taught in MSA. The test, which evaluates their reading comprehension and writing skills, is based on a literary text about the Nobel Prize-winning author Naguib Mahfouz that the students read before answering questions related to the text. The students are then required to write an extensive composition on a choice of topic delving into an academic or a societal issue. Assessment for placement purposes in this case does not take into consideration absolute proficiency levels; rather, it aims to determine the extent to which a student's knowledge of MSA will make it easier to learn or improve the standard language through literature. Subsequently, listening and speaking are informally evaluated during an oral interview conducted in one of the dialects spoken by the instructor or the students, or in MSA. Students who are admitted into the literature course speak, understand, and/or code-switch in different Arabic dialects, but only students who are familiar with more formal levels of the language are admitted. The minimum requirement for advanced heritage speakers to be admitted into the literature course is the Advanced Mid Level for writing skills in the 2012 guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages:

Writers at the Advanced Mid sublevel are able to meet a range of work and/or academic writing needs. They demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe with detail in all major time frames with good control of aspect. They are able to write straightforward summaries on topics of general interest. (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012, p. 12)

The placement test corroborates the finding that grammatical knowledge is higher among early sequential bilinguals who were exposed to the heritage language first (through middle school in their home country) and then to English, compared to simultaneous bilinguals. Arabic literature, the only upper-level course offered to these students, requires a minimum of just 10 students to run in a given semester, but it is often canceled. For example, except for two semesters (Spring 2011 and 2012), the Arabic literature course was regularly canceled for low enrollment, yet many students had taken the placement test and been approved for admission. In a later instance, in 2014, 29 students took and passed the Arabic placement exams, but only 19 of them were placed into a modern Arabic literature course. Enrollment trends in Arabic went down in American colleges in general by 5.9% between 2013 and 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2018). At my college, the lack of a major in languages, combined with the low proportion of Arab students (whites, including Arabs, represent only 12% of enrolled students) could explain the tendency for classes not to run. Indeed, in Fall 2015, over 300 students from several Arabic countries enrolled in various programs and majors—but not Arabic literature. Granting that we are missing data on their fluency, it seems that these students did not enroll in Arabic literature and other courses not only because their majors did not require a language, but also because of the recently implemented university-wide Pathways Initiative. This new system of general education requirements has affected enrollment in languages because it is now competing with social sciences and humanities courses, which the initiative places in the same category as modern languages.

Research Methods

In light of these data, I hypothesized that the low enrollment in the Arabic literature course is symptomatic of the dysfunction in course offering trends that fail to meet students' needs and interests. In deciding to investigate student interest in alternatives to literature courses, I drew on both quantitative and qualitative data gathered between 2014 and 2016 for a mixed-method approach.

Quantitative Data

I obtained quantitative data from the Modern Language Department, the Modern Language lab, and the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. The data relate to class enrollment, placement tests, and students' countries of origin. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, I sent an email targeting students who had taken placement tests and were assigned to the modern Arabic literature course, followed by a questionnaire sent to the 25 of these students who had agreed to participate in the research; 22 completed the questionnaire. In addition, 23 students took part in three group interviews on the topics of the questionnaire. I am aware of the limitations of the study given the sample size.

Qualitative Data

I gathered qualitative data by means of three informal group interactions with 23 students of the 25 contacted by email; and from: (a) discussions during office hours of independent study alternatives to course cancellations; (b) interactions with students who took placement tests for the advanced Arabic literature course; (c) attendance at three major events organized annually by the department—the Modern Languages Fair, International Mother Language Day, and the Language Career Fair; (d) classroom observations and discussions; (e) interaction with advisees (modern languages and international studies);

and (f) attendance at Arabic Club meetings, where we covered topics related to language requirements, course content, and alternatives to literature courses.

Findings and Discussion

Summary of the Questionnaire Results (*n* = 22 students)

Among the 10 male and 12 female students, 9 spoke Arabic only, while 13 students spoke Arabic and another language. When recalling their foundational years in Arabic, 9 students expressed their pride in having been good students in both elementary and middle school, while 11 noted on the questionnaire that they had done particularly well in high school. Two students, however, confessed that they had never been good students in Arabic. In terms of alternatives to literature courses, 11 students expressed interest in courses on Arab cinema; only one showed an interest in Arab mass media. Six students said they would like a general course on the cultures and societies of the Arab world. Surprisingly, none of them were interested in identity and Arab diaspora as a theme. Three would be willing to enroll in an advanced course in international business. Seventeen students strongly agreed and 5 agreed that Arabic studies are very useful. It was interesting that seven students agreed that only native speakers can take advanced Arabic courses, while 14 students disagreed with this statement. All 22 agreed that any student can major in Arabic as long as they study hard. Finally, 20 stated that they intend to major in a field where they could use their language skills.

Summary of the Group Interview Results (*n* = 23 students)

In contrast to the questionnaire, which offered students a list of suggested courses to choose from, the group interviews left the possibilities open; only one student spontaneously expressed interest in taking a course in Arabic on the history and culture of the Arab world. Eight mentioned their need for an advanced grammar course or, alternatively, a course on academic writing in Arabic, and one student suggested that the college offer a creative writing course in Arabic. Though most students agreed that, given the choice, they would major in a field where they could use their language skills, the most important finding is that students' fields of interest transcend literature courses and call for a wider course offering. This research corroborates other studies that focus on the motivations of HLLs to study Arabic.

Suggestions for Content-Based Curricula

What can be done given this context and the characteristics of native and advanced heritage speakers of Arabic in and beyond this community college? The content-based curricula I propose here could offer a response to this issue. I begin by noting that experimentation with and implementation of innovative content-driven language courses are not new (Lyster, 2011). Such approaches to language pedagogy have the benefit of integrating the learning of a given subject with language acquisition (Mohan, 1986). Similarly, language for specific purposes (LSP) instruction can be defined as the teaching of a language using content tailored to student interests and needs. As Laborda (2011) explains, the main feature of LSP is the centrality of the learner's needs ("purposes") (p. 103). Various factors motivate HLLs to study their language. One of them would seem to be the valuing of cultural diversity in the United States, an attitude corroborated by my discussions with students of Arab descent at the college. Consequently, we should teach a curriculum that reflects the cultures of the students—especially in the case of Arabic speakers, given the role their culture plays in the world political arena. Foreign language instructors can be, as Scalera (2004) suggests, the catalyst for the inclusion of cultures in a meaningful way into a school's culture. This view is corroborated by Husseinali's (2006) conclusion that "Cultural Identity Orientations" are a motivating factor behind the study of Arabic (p. 402). In his investigation, "74% of heritage learners agreed that they are learning Arabic to be able to relate to their Islamic identity and 66% agreed that they are learning Arabic because of their own Arabic culture" (p. 404).

Other factors in language study are linked to history, culture, and language ideology. Standard Arabic is metonymically linked to Arab identity. By epitomizing a glorious past, Arabic becomes a unifying force in the imagined Arab community. Finally, choosing to study Arabic acknowledges the necessity for the process of identity construction, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. Many students reported having chosen Arabic because of the ties it helps to build with the Arab and Muslim communities in the diaspora. This desire was reported equally by students of Arab descent and non-Arabs, such as Pakistani, Afghani, Bengali, and sub-Saharan African students.

While skills developed in literature courses contribute to students' academic growth, I favor content-based instruction, which is particularly appropriate for advanced heritage students who have a solid background in the target language and culture (Bowles, 2012) and who express a need for developing knowledge of register, stylistics, and high-level vocabulary. Because language study is incomplete without a historical and cultural context, materials for HL instruction should include a significant and authentic cultural component.

Sehlaoui (2008) calls for courses that value HL speakers/learners and that emphasize the contributions of Arab or Muslim scholars to the sciences, astronomy, and history. Such courses would help lead students to develop a feeling of belonging when they see their language and culture esteemed and represented. The added value of curriculum related to issues that are relevant to the learners (such as language and identity, languages in contact, language maintenance and loss) is transmitted by exposing students to different expressions of the language (e.g., formal, informal, academic, business).

As examples of theme-based instruction, I suggest offering Arabic courses that target proficiency through film, TV dramas, or media (such as televised news reports or radio broadcasts), which would help students elevate their Arabic language proficiency while improving their knowledge of Arab culture. Other themes of interest to HLLs include Middle East and North African history after World War II, human rights, bilingualism, emigration, and identity. Such courses would help students develop literacy skills as well as academic writing in their HL. The efficiency of content-based instruction in meeting students' professional needs is particularly demonstrated in language courses for business implemented with the help of the Centers for International Business Education and Research (Fryer, 2012). Nonetheless, I call for courses that extend beyond business to include language for various professions and courses that stresses advanced communication, creative thinking, and intercultural skills applied to such areas as tourism, media, society, business, and technology.[3]

Furthermore, I posit that it would be pedagogically sound to offer a curriculum with a socio-affective orientation. Doing so would address HLLs' affective needs, including the need to explore issues of identity while building on learners' positive associations. Finally, learners can benefit from opportunities to develop a greater understanding of the "imagined communities" beyond their immediate college, family, and social networks in which Arabic may provide valuable cultural capital.

The above rationale is backed up by the findings of research done in a large American university about the motivations for studying Arabic, which concluded that 66.5% of all those surveyed—heritage and non-heritage—felt that speaking and knowing Arabic would help them get a good job (Husseinali, 2006). In addition, the advantage of the content-based approach is that it contributes to knowledge construction (Sehlaoui, 2008, p. 288), arguably one of the fundamental dimensions of multicultural education.

Conclusion

In addition to literature courses—still one of the best ways to develop complex writing skills such as deep subordination and vocabulary enrichment—this paper proposes alternatives for advanced heritage speakers. Although stimulating, literature courses may not be the only answer for students in search of efficient ways to market their language skills in a competitive professional marketplace. Based on my

interactions with students who took the placement exams for the modern Arabic literature course and on students' responses to the questionnaire, I conclude that students have much wider interests than the ones implicit in a literature-centered program. Interviews showed that students, given a choice, would major in a field where they could use their language skills in a variety of contexts that a content-based course would provide.

Even though the focus of language instruction at high levels is not always language preservation, instruction at this level of proficiency should involve a language that students need and material that is relevant. Such instruction also represents an opportunity to develop a more linguistically competent generation of American workers who can fill pressing needs in international relations and international commerce. One of the advantages of LSP courses is the use of contexts, texts, and situations from the students' majors (Laborda, 2011).

Moreover, HL learners and speakers can be more involved and productive when courses are designed to address their identified needs. Keeping these learners motivated will help them achieve high levels of proficiency in a context where Arabic is simultaneously a heritage language, a global language relevant to international relations, and a language critical to American security.

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Notes

[1]In fact, the latest linguistic research actually refers to the complex linguistic situation in the Arab world in terms of quadriglossia (Ennaji, 2001).

[2]All community college data was provided by the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment at LaGuardia Community College (Spring 2014 and Spring 2015). https://www.laguardia.edu/IR/IR-facts/

[3]The problem is that these would not be considered liberal arts courses if we define them as "applied skills" in an Associate program, which requires 45 credits in liberal arts.

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