

## LEARNING ARABIC CULTURE BY SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper investigates attitudes of non-native learners towards learning aspects of Arabic culture. To achieve the goal of the study, the researchers used a questionnaire. The sample included 43 students enrolled at Ali Baba International Center, Qasid Arabic Institute and Modern Arabic Language International Center (MALIC). Results showed that the non-native learners of Arabic have positive attitudes towards Arabic culture and they favored aspects such as rules and behaviors, customs and festivals, political institutions, history, family life and food.*

**KEYWORDS:** Non-native, Learner's attitude, Learning, Arabic, Foreign, Culture

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## INTRODUCTION

Arabic has played –and is still playing –an important role in the history and in the improvement of Arabs and Muslims .While Wikipedia (2010) mentioned that it is spoken by more than 295 million native speakers, Dabashi (2013) stated that 1.6 billion Muslims throughout the world use Arabic in their prayers and religious recitations. The majority of Arabs live between Morocco and Mauritania in the west and Iraq and the Arabian Gulf in the east .In addition, it is a liturgic language which used to recite the Noble Quran and in prayer. It is also required from every Muslim no matter what his native tongue is. Arabic has also helped largely to preserve cultural unity and continuity in the Muslim world, and has registered the accomplishments of the Arab-Muslim peoples. Muslims and Arabs believe that Arabic is a God-given language, single in beauty and majesty and the most meaningful of all languages for expressing ideas and feelings.

Arabic is becoming an important language in all fields; as a result, learning it opens up many employment possibilities in a number of fields. Thus, there are many reasons which motivate a lot of learners from different parts of the world to learn Arabic. Some learners learn Arabic as part of their academic work; others learn Arabic to know about the cultures of the Arabic language and to get jobs with the US government or non-governmental agencies operating in the Arab World .While some learners of Arab origin often learn Arabic to understand the Arabic heritage and to attain familiarity with the language of their ancestors, Muslim learners learn Arabic to be able to read and understand the Noble Quran and Hadith.

Arabic is one of the most important languages in the USA .The need for Arabic has increased after 9/11. Furthermore ,Arabic is not only an important language in its native

countries but it is also important and critical in terms of international business ,economy ,trade and diplomacy. In addition, it is the language of the Quran and is needed for Islamic practices to all Muslims.

Oppenheim (1998) points out that attitude plays a significant role in shaping our world view .It influences our perception of the world around us and determines how we react to different things of the world .The term attitude has been discussed and defined in various ways and from many angles. Cook (1996) believes that learners' attitudes correlate immediately with the language learning situation and the environment as a whole .It is agreed that positive attitudes ease the learning process though attitudes do not necessarily determine behavior. Learners' attitudes help to gain insight into the language learning and teaching process. As cited in Oqaily (2013), Krech, Crutchfield and Ballachey define attitude as being a lasting system of motivations ,perceptions ,emotions and cognitive responses a person has to a given aspect of the world .This explanation confirms emotions and motivation as distinctive variables separating attitudes from beliefs.

The issue of attitudes to language and its culture is of great importance mainly in the language teaching classroom. Ammon (2004) states that the way learners respond to the target language culture affects their attitude towards the language itself. Khuwaileh (2000) suggests the same point of view and depicts language classroom as a group of several cultural variables .He asserts that culture always manages to become part of the language classroom .Moreover, the introduction of target culture in foreign language classroom leads to improving the social attitude as well as increasing the positive view point towards the target language community. As a result, positive attitudes towards learning a target language lead to a higher level of motivation.

Karabinar & Guler (2012) has examined the attitudes of language teachers at Turkish universities towards teaching culture. The attitudes have been determined in terms of: 1- content and learner levels that are addressed 2- amount of cultural information and the materials and strategies employed in language classes in teaching about culture .Moreover ,the study examined the effects of teacher-related factors such as being a native or non-native speaking teacher, working at private or state university and participation in professional development activities on their attitudes of culture teaching .The data were elicited by a survey method .A questionnaire was administered to 155 ELT instructors working at language preparatory schools of 17 universities in Turkey. Results indicated that the higher participation rate in training courses on teaching culture and professional development activities guide to a more positive attitude towards the integration of culture. However, there is no important difference between native and non-native speaking teachers working at private or state universities in terms of overall attitude towards teaching culture. Similarly, Tseng (2013) has examined the relationship between the attitudes of 90 Taiwanese students towards foreign culture and their proficiency levels in the foreign language, English, Results showed an important correlation between the English proficiency levels and attitudes towards culture.

This paper aims to explore the foreign learners' attitudes towards the Arabic culture. It specifically tries to answer the following question: What are the attitudes of non-native

learners towards learning Arabic culture? And what are the most important aspects of Arabic culture that they favor?

Few studies have focused on learning Arabic culture by non-natives locally in Jordan and the world at large. Therefore, this study may fill a gap in literature. The significance of this study also stems from its instruments and interactive design, where multiple procedures for data collection are used, and the synergy of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Furthermore, this study is of interest to researchers, decision makers, language planners, textbooks designers, learners and teachers as well.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Baker (1992) confirms that attitudes also have been stressed by social psychologists who believe that they play a significant role in almost all aspects of our lives, including our level of success in first and foreign language learning. Behaviorists describe attitude as a social product while the mentalists define attitude as a mental response to a given situation. Speilberger (2004) states that attitude or response may be depicted as an abstract unit which is realized in the form of behavior. Attitude not only predicts behavioral patterns, but also stimulates different manifestations of behavior as represented in culture.

Ariffin (2006) claims that the vague and enormous nature of culture –as it differs from country to country and community to community –generates diverse responses amongst those who reside outside the circle of a particular culture. A community may react positively or negatively towards the culture of the other communities. The nature of these attitudes and responses affects the explicit behavioural patterns of language users. Byram & Grundy (2003) adds that it also influences how people respond to various characteristics of the target culture. Since culture and language are undividable, these responses to target culture are extended to the language related with it.

Crucial studies that dealt with learners' attitudes towards the Arabic culture have been discussed by Abu-Dulbough (2005), Bell (2005), Genc & Bada (2005), Palmer (2007), Du (2008), Haron, Ahmad, Mamat & Mohamed (2010), Seraj (2010), Hammami (2012), Karabinar & Guler (2012), Rafieyan, Abdul Majid & Eng (2013), Rafieyan, Eng & Mohamed (2013) & Tseng (2013).

Abu-Dulbough (2005) investigated the impact of cultural aspects on the learning ability of US Peace Corps Volunteers who learnt Arabic as a foreign language. The cultural aspects were: learners' attitudes towards the Jordanian Arabic culture, the role of language instructor in language learning, the role of the techniques used to introduce cultural topics in language learning and the relationship between the Jordanian Arabic culture and the Arabic language. Data were gathered by a questionnaire of sixty-seven items which was distributed to 56 US Peace Corps Volunteers serving in Jordan. The results indicated that there were positive attitudes towards Arabic culture, traditions, customs and values. Furthermore, the participants realized the importance of having language and cultural experts who helped them to deal with people representing the Jordanian culture. On the

other hand, the participants believed that cultural presentation techniques are as equal in importance as their contents; therefore, the techniques should be varied to deal with diverse learning skills. Finally, the findings showed that there was a strong mutual relationship between the Arabic language and the Jordanian Arabic culture.

Bell (2005) examined teacher's perceptions regarding teaching behaviors and attitudes that contribute to efficient foreign language teaching and learning. The researcher gathered the data by means of a questionnaire to which responded 457 postsecondary foreign language teachers of French, German, and Spanish. Based on current research on second language acquisition, diverse teaching behaviors and perceptions of effective foreign language teachers were recognized for inclusion in the questionnaire. The results displayed an emerging professional consensus concerning a number of teacher attitudes and behaviors interconnected to foreign language teaching. The more that is known about teacher beliefs, the more likely the profession will be to create models for foreign language teacher preparation and evaluation that reveal relevant attitudes and behaviors of foreign language teaching.

Genc & Bada (2005) tried to find out what students think about the effects of the culture class they attended in the fall semester of the academic year 2003-2004. The participants were students of the EFL Cukurova University in Turkey. The data were gathered three months following the completion of 28-hour culture course. The researchers held lecture-type sessions, as well as research project presentations. On the other hand, students responded to a five-item questionnaire. The results illustrated that culture class was significantly useful in terms of language skills, raising cultural awareness as well as changing attitudes towards native and target societies. This study verified the importance of integrating culture class in the curriculum of language teaching departments; it is a vital element of language learning and teaching. It has a great effect on the improvement of communicative competence as well as other skills in the instruction of any language.

Palmer (2007) collected data by using a student survey combined with a similar survey administered to 82 teachers of Arabic at over 30 institutions of higher education. He used simple statistical procedures to analyze the data. His study aimed to investigate the opinions of students and teachers towards the exposure of spoken varieties of Arabic in Arabic learning programs in the United States. The results indicated that the majority of the students want to learn spoken Arabic and want to communicate with native speakers, though this majority is not encouraged to use spoken Arabic in informal situations by their teachers.

Du (2008) examined the effectiveness and applicability of the ethnographic interview method as an approach to facilitate culture learning in the context of Chinese as a foreign language. A very significant goal of the study was to create actual cross-cultural contacts with native speakers of the target culture from the local community. Firstly, learners were trained in the skills of ethnographic interview techniques. Secondly, arguments were made for them to conduct two ethnographic interviews on their preferred topics over the time frame of 15 weeks within one semester. To capture the multipart nature of culture learning

, the researcher used a simultaneous mixed methods research design .Four sources used to elicit data: the custom-designed survey, a focus group interview, students' reflective papers and final essays .The results showed that the ethnographic interview approach had verified its inclusiveness in containing various domains that the vital goals of culture learning would attain .Students were able to reconsider aspects of their own culture that they had been taken for granted .Moreover , to develop openness towards other people with a different cultural background from their own . Finally, after performing their interview tasks, the learners' interest, understanding and respect towards the target culture was enhanced.

Seraj (2010) examined the attitude of teachers of Arabic as a foreign language towards some of the most important teaching methods .T-test and Pearson correlation tests were used in this study to draw conclusions from the research questions .Forty -eight male and female Arabic teachers who taught Arabic in the United States took part in this research. Results indicated that new teachers needed training programs to aid them understand what is available to them and how to select the best teaching method for each class. Seraj added that these training programs could be used as an updating tool for older teachers of Arabic as a foreign language .Such programs could help older teachers to know the new trends and methodologies used in their fields of specialty.

Haron et al. (2010) aimed to understand the Arabic speaking learning strategies of selected Malay good Arabic speakers and Malay poor Arabic speakers at the International Islamic University Malaysia within and outside the parameters of the educational settings .In addition ,they also sought to investigate the students' perceptions of the Arabic speaking skill in terms of its importance to the Malay learners, the desired level of Arabic speaking skill for the Malay learners and the prerequisites for becoming fluent Arabic speakers. The researchers designed the present study to be a case study using individual interviews and focus group interview as methods to collect the data. The results implied that success in Arabic speaking skill is attributed to the several strategies which different learners brought into focus and not solely relying on environment. But the effectiveness of the strategies is influenced by the learners' understanding of how Arabic speaking skill is studied .Learners should be aware that, as any other language, Arabic also involves forms and functions. Therefore, the learners should attend both of them in accurate methods to become good Arabic speakers. Learners who concentrate on forms only might not be able to become fluent Arabic speakers due to less functional practice. Similarly, learners who concentrate on function alone might not become good Arabic speakers due to the limited knowledge of the language.

Hammami (2012) investigated Arab American high school teachers' perceptions regarding developing cultural awareness of first-level Arabic language learners .Data were gathered through one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews of 5 high school teachers of Arabic within the same district. Seidel's qualitative data analysis method and open coding followed by axial coding were used in analyzing the data. Results from the teachers' interviews indicated that developing cultural awareness in first-level Arabic language classes needs a strong connection between the Arabic language and culture. Culture learning can be enhanced by incorporating a broad variety of culturally focused activities, practices and

assessment tools. In addition, culture learning and teaching can also be encouraged through effective communication with students and parents and by addressing constant cultural challenges encountered in class. It is recommended that teachers employ best cultural practices for beginning Arabic classes and support consistency in assessing the right cultural skills.

Rafieyan ,Abdul Majid & Eng (2013), assessed the relationship between attitude towards integrating target language culture into classroom instruction and the development of pragmatic understanding .The researchers gathered the data through two pragmatic comprehension tests ;one was used as a pre-test and the other as a post-test and the administration of a Likert scale attitude questionnaire to 32 intermediate level language learners at a language academy in Malaysia . The results showed that a positive attitude towards learning target language culture guided to a superior level of pragmatic comprehension. As a result, it was recommended to equip foreign language course textbooks as well as foreign language classroom instructions with cultural information.

Rafieyan ,Eng & Mohamed (2013) investigated the attitudes of Iranian language learners towards the incorporation of cultural elements of the target language community into their classroom instructions from effective, behavioral and cognitive viewpoints .The data were gathered through the completion of a 12-Items Likert scale attitude questionnaire by 47 Iranian adult intermediate-level learners of English as a foreign language at a language institute in Iran ,following a semester –long cultural instructions . The results implied that Iranian language learners have positive attitudes towards learning about the target language culture and this positive attitude is evident within behavioral, affective and more significantly cognitive domains. The pedagogical results of the study suggested integration of the target language cultural elements into every language classroom instruction.

## **METHOD**

The population of the current research consisted of all non-native students who learn Arabic in Jordan .A sample of 43 students was chosen purposively from three private centers in Amman namely: Ali Baba International Center, Qasid Arabic Institute and Modern Arabic Language International Center (MALIC). The demographic background about the respondents' general background included data such as gender, religion, age, level of education, type of center attended, nationality, the respondents' mother tongue and the language of the parents. The demographic characteristics of the students' are shown in Table (1).



**Table (1): Students' Demographic Background**

|                                    |   |    |
|------------------------------------|---|----|
| <b>Gender</b>                      | Males   | 24 |
|                                    | Females   | 19 |
| <b>Religion</b>                    | Muslim  | 12 |
|                                    | Christian   | 18 |
|                                    | Others  | 13 |
| <b>Age</b>                         | 14-19   | 1  |
|                                    | 20-29   | 31 |
|                                    | 30-39   | 11 |
|                                    | More than 40  | -  |
| <b>Level in Learning Arabic</b>    | Beginner  | 29 |
|                                    | Intermediate  | 10 |
|                                    | Advanced  | 4  |
| <b>Nationality</b>                 | Jordanian   | -  |
|                                    | Other : 2 Dutch ,Greek , 10 American , 4 German ,2 Swedish ,1 Japanese, 4 Korean ,6 Turkish ,Czech, 6 British ,Belgian ,South African ,Australian ,British & Libyan, Kyrgyz |    |
| <b>The Mother Tongue</b>           | English   | 16 |
|                                    | Others  | 27 |
| <b>Father's Mother Tongue</b>      | English   | 14 |
|                                    | Arabic  | 4  |
|                                    | Others : Japanese (1), Swedish (2) ,German (3), Dutch (3),Greek (1), Korean (5) ,Turkish (6), Hindi (1), Italian (1), Kyrgyz (1)  | 24 |
|                                    | No answer   | 1  |
| <b>Mother's Mother Tongue</b>      | English   | 15 |
|                                    | Arabic  | 1  |
|                                    | Others: Japanese (1),Swedish (2), German(3), Dutch (2),Greek (1), Korean (5), Turkish (5), Hindi(1), Italian (1) Kyrgyz (1), Czech (1), Spanish (2), Swahili (1)            | 26 |
|                                    | No answer   | 1  |
| <b>Reasons for Studying Arabic</b> | Required  | 7  |
|                                    | Personal enrichment   | 25 |
|                                    | Interested in Arabic culture  | 21 |
|                                    | Interested in the Arabic language   | 25 |
|                                    | Interested in travelling  | 16 |
|                                    | Job prospective   | 25 |
|                                    | Religious reasons   | 7  |
| <b>Center</b>                      | Ali Baba  | 17 |
|                                    | Qasid   | 12 |
|                                    | MALIC   | 14 |

A questionnaire was used in this research .The researchers designed a questionnaire which was designed specifically to meet the needs of the current study. The questionnaire was pretested before it was administrated to the sample and was written in both English and Arabic, with a cover letter that explained the objectives of the research. The questionnaire comprised two sections and was basically based on Abu-Dulbough (2005), Bell (2005), Du

(2008), Jabeen, F. & Shah, S. (2011) and Rafieyan (2013). Some items were added and others were modified to meet the needs of the current research.

The first section of the questionnaire elicited demographic, personal data about the participants' nationality, age, sex, etc. The second section of the questionnaire intended to gather data about the learners' attitudes towards Arabic culture .It consisted of 14 items. Seventy copies of the questionnaire were distributed by the researchers, and 43 responses were returned.

## RESULTS

*What are the attitudes of the non-native learners towards learning Arabic culture? And what aspects of Arabic culture they favor most?*

Table (2) below shows the results of the learners' attitudes towards learning Arabic culture .Surprisingly, it indicates that (100 %) of the learners assign high importance to learning "rules of behaviors" which means that it gains the lion's share if it is compared to other cultural aspects.

**Table (2) Frequencies and Percentages of Learners' Attitudes towards learning the Aspects of Arabic Culture**

| NO. | Level of Importance<br>Cultural Aspect | High  |       | Low   |      |
|-----|--|-------|-------|-------|------|
|     |  | Freq. | %     | Freq. | %    |
| 1   | Rules of behaviors                     | 43    | 100.0 | 0     | 0.0  |
| 2   | Customs and festivals                  | 41    | 95.3  | 2     | 4.7  |
| 3   | Political institutions                 | 41    | 95.3  | 2     | 4.7  |
| 4   | History                                | 41    | 95.3  | 2     | 4.7  |
| 5   | Law and order                          | 40    | 93.0  | 3     | 7    |
| 6   | Family life                            | 40    | 93.0  | 3     | 7    |
| 7   | Food                                   | 38    | 88.4  | 5     | 11.6 |
| 8   | Literature and arts                    | 38    | 88.4  | 5     | 11.6 |
| 9   | Geography                              | 37    | 86.0  | 6     | 14   |
| 10  | Youth life                             | 36    | 83.7  | 7     | 16.3 |
| 11  | Costumes dressing                      | 32    | 74.4  | 11    | 25.5 |
| 12  | Transportation                         | 30    | 69.8  | 13    | 30.2 |
| 13  | Music                                  | 30    | 69.8  | 13    | 30.2 |
| 14  | School life                            | 29    | 67.4  | 14    | 32.6 |

In response to items No. (2, 3, 4) which attempt to elicit data related to attitudes of learners towards Arabic culture in terms of "customs and festivals", "political institutions" and "history", these items score the second highest percentages (95.3 %) when compared to the rest of the cultural aspects. Similarly, responses to items five and six reveal that (93 %) of the total number of learners believe that "law and order" and "family life" have a high level of importance .Also, results of item seven are completely identical with the results of item eight .That is "food " and "literature and arts" score high level of importance ,thus accounting for (88.4 %).



The importance of "geography" and "youth life" is highlighted in Table (2) above which shows that 86 % and 83.7 % of the participants indicate their agreement. A lower percentage of agreement is indicated in matters related to costumes / dressing (74.4 %) while in transportation (69.8 %) and similarly in school life (67.4 %).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As shown in Table (3), results indicate that the overwhelming majority of the learners have positive attitudes towards learning the Arabic culture and have reacted strongly towards integrating Arabic culture in the classroom as well as in the textbooks. These results are in line with Cook (2000) who stated that positive attitudes ease the learning process and help to gain insight into the language learning and teaching process. Furthermore, these results correspond with Khuwaileh (2000) and Ammon (2004) who confirmed that the introduction of the target culture in foreign language classroom leads to improving the social attitude as well as increasing the positive view point towards the target language and the target language community.

Similarly, these results are in line with the findings of Genic & Bada (2005) who found that culture classes were significantly useful in terms of language skills, raising cultural awareness as well as changing attitudes towards native and target societies. He added that it is a vital element of language learning and teaching. It has a great effect on the improvement of communicative competence as well as other skills in the instruction of any language. Additionally, these outcomes are identical with the findings of Abu-Dulbough (2005) and Du (2008) who found that there were positive attitudes towards Arabic culture, traditions, customs and values. However, these outcomes are in line with the findings of Hammami (2012) and Rafieyan, Abdul Majid & Eng (2013) who found that the positive attitudes towards learning the target language culture guided to a superior level of pragmatic comprehension.

Results also indicated that foreign learners of Arabic in Jordan have considered the following aspects of Arabic culture as very important to learn. These aspects are: rules and behavior, customs and festivals, political institutions, history, family life and food. These results may be attributed to the fact that they admire the Arabic language and as a result they admire its culture. They also assigned less importance to school life, music and transportation.

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