

# TEACHING LESS COMMONLY TAUGHT LANGUAGES: PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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## **Abstract**

*The article is a case study involving Montclair State University (MSU) students of Arabic, one of the less commonly taught languages offered at this university. We aim by this study to present the make up and linguistic background of students enrolling in Arabic program, discuss the diversity and pedagogical issues; and investigate the implications of having heritage and non-heritage speakers in the same classroom. Data were collected through a detailed questionnaire, and a survey. A quantitative and qualitative analysis was conducted on the participants' responses. The findings showed that the students who were enrolled in this Arabic course come from various linguistic backgrounds and their level of language proficiency varied widely. The study also revealed learners' lack of understanding about the differences and similarities between formal and informal Arabic and their dissatisfaction about the learning process and their desire to learn more about Arabic culture. Despite these weaknesses, both heritage and non-heritage learners express positive attitudes about being in the same class and by learning from each other. Pedagogical conditions and issues are discussed and suggestions for teachers of Arabic and other less commonly taught languages are addressed at the end of this paper.*

**Key words:** Arabic, learning process, pedagogical conditions.

The United States is now, as it has always been, an area with rich linguistic diversity. In the 2000 Census Bureau, the foreign born population of the U.S. was estimated to 31 million, or 17.9% of the U.S. population. Only in New Jersey, for example, 25.5% of the population is foreign born. This foreign born population came from various ethnic communities and speaks a variety of languages. According to (SIL International, 2002), in the U.S. over 175

languages are spoken by immigrant ethnic groups to name few are Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Arabic, and Swahili.

The U. S. has a long history of providing educational programs to help new immigrant students to maintain their heritage language and for non-native speakers to learn new foreign languages. However Western European languages such as Spanish, French, and German was given much attention and their teaching was more supported and funded by the government than non-Western languages such as Arabic, Hebrew, Chinese, etc. According to Cumming (2001), Middle Eastern languages made up only 2% of all foreign language classes offered in the U. S. where Hebrew represented 1.3% Hebrew and Arabic .5%. But after September 11, 2001, the U.S. government showed a great interest in support for less commonly taught languages mainly Arabic language because of the inability of American officials to communicate effectively with the Arab world and of the shortage of translators of Arabic.

#### U.S. Government Funding for Foreign and Heritage Language Education

Recently, the U.S. government has called to action for national foreign language capabilities that aims to build language and cultural capability, develop language skills in a wide range of critical languages, strengthen programs and tools in foreign languages and cultures, and integrate language training into career fields and increase the number of language professionals in these languages.

In the past, few government policies did recognize and acknowledge more commonly taught languages as a valuable national resource, and supported their teaching to heritage and non-heritage speakers. The support of the U.S. government for foreign and heritage education went back to 1972 where the Higher Education Act passed to provide federal funding for universities that promote less commonly taught languages. In 1988, the U.S. Congress passed the Foreign Language Act that specifies the most critical languages for U.S. government interests. Five languages of which Arabic was one were designated by legislators. Also, in 1994, the Educate America Act stressed on teaching foreign languages. Recently, funding by various government offices (Department of Education, Department of State, Department of Defense, and Office of Director of National Intelligence) to support teaching foreign languages mainly less commonly taught languages has increased. Education appropriations for fiscal year 2002 included a 26% increase for Title VI of the Higher Education Act and the Fulbright-Hays International Studies Program. For example, for Arabic, this added \$20.5

million in new funding to the Nation's Middle East studies centers (Kramer, 2002).

Initiatives were also undertaken and launched by various centers to support foreign language education and to develop the non-English language resources. Among these initiatives is the heritage languages initiative (HLI), a national effort launched by both Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) and the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) to promote the design and implementation of heritage language programs at all levels from pre K-12 in schools, as well as in colleges and universities. Also, the National Middle East language Center was created in August 2002 at Brigham Young University, the first Title VI Language Resource Center to focus solely on the languages of the Middle East namely Arabic, Hebrew, Farsi, and Turkish (National Middle East Language Resource Center, n.d.). This funding reflects the U.S. federal government's growing awareness of the need to enhance the understanding of Middle Eastern affairs and languages. In addition, summer programs were developed thanks to summer curriculum fellowships provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Information Agency, and National Council for US-Arab Relations. Examples of such summer program is the program at Yale University offered by graduate students after-school programs for high school students in African languages such as Afrikaans, Hausa, Swahili, Yoruba, and Zulu, and the summer program at the University of Wisconsin or at West High School in Madison to teach Swahili in after-school programs (Kuntz, 2001). Another program created in 1990 at the Northfield-Mt. Hermon school (MA) provided Arabic instruction. Besides these summer programs, organizations were also created such as the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), and the American Association of Teachers of Arabic (AATA) to link teachers of Arabic and to support materials development and language acquisition.

Thanks to U.S. government recent funding, teaching less commonly taught languages has increased significantly. Schools, colleges, and universities start offering most of foreign languages to satisfy the ethnic communities or English speakers. For example, at Montclair State University, the Arabic program was developed right after September 11 to raise students and public community's awareness of cultural differences and of societal and political issues of Arabic-speaking countries. In fact the researcher was the person who took the initiative to create and develop Arabic courses. Four levels (Beginning I and II, and Intermediate I and II) were created between 2002-2004 and two different levels were taught each semester. Since then the enrolment for Arabic has increased dramatically because of the large number of Arabophone students that live in the New Jersey area as well as non-native speakers who are

interested to take this language and learn about a different culture. The great demand for Arabic has led to a hiring of a full time faculty member last year who developed advanced Arabic language courses and cultural courses, and created a minor in Arabic language. MSU has now a minor in Arabic language, and another minor in Arabic Studies is underway.

### **Research Design**

Although many studies have been conducted on more commonly taught languages (e.g., Spanish, French, and German) and addressed many issues, and concerns such as the changing dynamics of foreign language classrooms, social and pedagogical climate of these classrooms, presence of heritage language speakers and their interaction with non-native speakers, range of learners' proficiencies, and instructional goals and models appropriate for these learners (e.g., Andrews, 2000; Benjamin, 1997; Gutiérrez, 1997; Katz, 2002; Lacorte and Canabal, 2002; Pino and Pino, 2000; Valdés 1998a), there has not been a great deal of research on less commonly taught languages such as Arabic, Hebrew and Persian. This article presents a case study that focuses on Arabic language, but its results can have broader implications and can offer insights into the teaching and learning other less commonly taught languages. The researcher's aim was to conduct a study that investigates all the less commonly taught languages' programs at MSU (Arabic, Chinese, German, Hebrew, Japanese, and Russian) in order to present an overall picture of all less commonly taught languages' programs, describe the make up and linguistic background of students enrolling in these programs, discuss the pedagogical conditions and issues; and investigate in depth the implications of having heritage and non-heritage speakers in these foreign classrooms. More importantly, she tends to offer some suggestions for teachers of these languages in particular and teachers of foreign classrooms. When she planned to collect the data during the last week of spring semester 2007, the goal was to obtain a larger sample of learners of all less taught languages offered at MSU. Unfortunately, it was impossible to get all the responses back from most language classes because students were either busy preparing for their finals, or reluctant to complete the tasks. Only one class of Beginning Arabic II completed the two instruments. Because of the small sample of gathered data, the researcher decided to consider this study as a pilot for a major one that she plans to carry in the fall 2007, and that will investigate again the six languages (Arabic, Chinese, German, Hebrew, Japanese, and Russian).

In this pilot study, the particular learners whose behavior was investigated are an entire class of university students of L2 Modern Standard

Arabic (MSA). An entire class of 16 students in their second semester of beginner Arabic class took part. A personal questionnaire and a survey were the two instruments used to collect the data. The purpose of this personal questionnaire is to present the make up and linguistic background of students enrolling in these programs and in Arabic in this case. Students were asked questions about their gender, age, place of birth, group, and level of education, L1 and dominant language. Learners were also asked if they knew other languages, and if so, where they learned them.

Table 1 presents a picture of the kind of students we have generally in Arabic classes and in particular in this class.

**Table 1:** Distribution of participants by gender, age, and L1 background, dominant language and knowledge of other languages

	Non-Heritage Speakers N= 5	Heritage Speakers N= 11
Gender	Males: 3 Females: 2	Males: 3 Females: 8
Age (years)	18-20: 4 21-24: 1	18-20: 5 21-24: 4 24-30: 2
L1 Background	English: 3 Hebrew: 2	Egyptian & Palestinian: 2 Egyptian: 2 Lebanese: 2 Palestinian: 4 Syrian & Lebanese: 1
Dominant Language	English: 11 English & Arabic: 5	
Knowledge of other Foreign Languages	French : 1 Spanish: 3 No other languages: 12	

In the survey, the questions fall into four categories: The first category contains questions asking about Arabic language and its features, reasons for taking Arabic, advantages of learning Arabic, and students' attitudes towards Arabic language and culture. The second category deals with the content of the

course, the importance of culture, the learning process, other topics of interest to them, their self-rated performance in some areas, and self-ratings of the level of difficulty they had with some activities in Standard Arabic. The third category is different for each group. Heritage speakers were asked questions about the need to modify their Arabic when communicating with the non-native students and their experience with non-heritage learners. On the other hand, the non-native speakers were asked about the roles of native speakers, and their impact on their learning process. Questions also ask about non-heritage learners' experience and feelings of learning Arabic in this atmosphere, and on the interactions with these native speakers' classmates. Examples of such questions are: "Were the native speakers intimidating?" "Were they helpful?" "Did they provide you with information that was culturally interesting?" The fourth category of the survey are open-ended questions where both groups have to express their opinions and point out pedagogical issues and difficulties, and suggest ideas for improving teaching Arabic.

### **Finding and Discussion**

The survey was largely qualitative as students were asked to provide essay-style answers to many of the questions. Their thoughts and comments are shared below, along with the tabulated results from some of the quantitative sections of the survey.

#### **Learners' Reasons for Learning Arabic and their Perception about Arabic Language**

When non-native speakers were asked why they are learning Arabic, four responded that it is because of personal interest and to satisfy world language requirement. Only one elaborated by saying the following.

*"I am learning Arabic because I would like to be able to communicate with Arabic-speakers. I am planning to get in international business and especially with Arab world where I will be doing a lot of traveling and contact with people. Talking Arabic will make the contact easy."*

On the other hand, native speakers' responses vary. Four subjects were learning Arabic to satisfy their world language requirement, three for reading and understanding "Quran", the holy book; two for maintaining Arabophone heritage and culture; one for job opportunities, and another one to be able to communicate with his parents and grand-parents. Three examples of the native speakers' answers:

*"I am learning Arabic to be able to read Koran and understand it. It is very important for prayers to know the verses in Arabic and cite them"*

*"I am learning Arabic because becoming fluent in my heritage language enables me not only to explore my culture, my roots and associate more closely with my fellow speakers of the language. It also helps me fight and overcome feelings of alienation."*

*"I have to rely on Arabic to communicate with my parents and my grand-parents. My parents immigrated to New Jersey five years ago. They have never been taught English and they have difficulties to speak it. My brothers and I were educated in American school in Cairo and we speak English fluently. We speak Egyptian Arabic at home but my knowledge in Classical Arabic is limited. I speak only Arabic at home but outside home I speak English with my friends. Therefore, it is important for me to maintain my Arabic and learn it so I will be able to pass the knowledge, values, and traditions to my children."*

When all participants were asked how they found learning Arabic, 12 considered it a difficult language. Three viewed it as neither easy nor difficult, while one considered it easy.

When they were asked "What makes Arabic a difficult language to learn?" out of 16 learners, 9 claimed it was grammar, four said it was pronunciation, two said it was the writing system, and one perceived it as vocabulary.

One of the most striking revelations of the survey was that many of the heritage speakers of Arabic do not understand the relationship between Standard Arabic and various regional dialects as well as the linguistic similarities and differences. When they were asked to respond to the following question: "Are Arabic varieties or dialects different or similar to Standard Arabic?" out of eleven native participants, eight responded that the dialects are similar to Standard Arabic; two responded that they are different; and one was not sure. When they were asked to name similarities and differences between

the dialect they speak and the Standard Arabic, only three mentioned vocabulary, and two identified pronunciation.

The examination of the above questions reveals that the majority of participants perceived learning Arabic to be difficult, and found grammar and pronunciation to be the aspects that make it a difficult language. It also demonstrates participants' lack of understanding about the differences between Standard Arabic they are learning and the existing regional dialects.

### **Learners' Views on the Content of the Course and their Performance**

The second category deals with the content of the course, the importance of culture, the learning process, subjects students would like to see added in the curriculum, students' self-rated performance in some areas, and self-ratings of the level of difficulty they had with some activities in Standard Arabic. All heritage and non-heritage participants agree that the course's content was mainly grammar. In response to the question "Is culture an integral part of the course?" most of the participants disagree and prefer to have songs, poems, entertainment and more videos and magazines integrated in the course to make it lively and interesting. When they were asked what other subjects they would like to be integrated in the curriculum, almost all participants preferred to have courses in Arabic culture and civilization, and Arabic literature, only two liked to have advanced courses in speaking, reading and writing.

Also, when asked to rate on a three-point scale (below average, average, above average) how well they are doing in learning Arabic compared to other learners, eight learners claimed that their learning of Arabic was below average, while five learners claimed that it was average, and only three learners that it was above average. Moreover, when asked to rate on a five-point scale (excellent, very well, well, a little bit, and not at all) their performance in speaking, listening, writing, reading, and spelling compared to the other learners, the majority answered positively that they performed better than the other learners. Table 2 presents the percentage of learners' responses for each skill which show that many of these learners perceive themselves as performing very well in each skill.

**Table 2:** Learners' self-ratings of their performance in some Arabic skills relative to classmates

	Excellent (%)	Very well (%)	Well (%)	A little bit (%)	A little bit (%)
Speaking	18.75	37.5	18.75	25	0
Listening	25	43.75	6.25	25	0
Spelling	0	31.25	43.75	25	0
Writing	18.75	62.50	18.75	0	
Reading	6.25	31.25	50	12.5	0

Furthermore, when asked to rate on a four-point scale (unable to do, with much difficulty, with little difficulty, without difficulty) their communicative performance in Arabic of some activities such as talking to a native speaker, watching and understanding a TV program, watching and understanding movies, and reading newspapers and magazines, the majority saw themselves as performing the activities with difficulty and often as unable to do them. Table 3 lists these learners' self-ratings for each activity.

**Table 3:** Learners' self-ratings of their performance in some activities

	Unable to do (%)	With much difficulty (%)	With little difficulty (%)	Without difficulty (%)
<i>Talk to a native speaker</i>	45	43.75	11	6.25
Watch and understand TV programs	32	37.50	18.75	11.75
Watch and understand movies	30	43.75	21	6.25
<i>Read newspapers and magazines</i>	41	40.25	18.75	0

The above participants' responses about the content of the course, the learning experience reveal that these students are not satisfied about the content of the course which focuses mainly on grammar and on reading small passages for pronunciation. Grammar is presented explicitly in the class followed by drills and exercises to reinforce the mastery and use of grammar and vocabulary taught. Students are not given much opportunity to practice the target language in meaningful contexts. Their low perceived performance in various skills and class activities reveals a limited knowledge of standard Arabic.

#### Non-Heritage Learners' Interaction with the Heritage Learners

The third category of questions in this survey is the most important in the researcher's opinion because it deals with the interaction of heritage and non-heritage, advantages and disadvantages of having both groups in the same class, non-heritage learners' experience, etc.

When non-native students were asked to comment on their experience about having heritage classmates in the class, among the five participants, three answered positively, one negatively and one was unsure.

*"You can ask them [heritage learners] when you do not understand something. You learn more about their culture. You have a lot fun in class.*

*"You learn more about the different dialects of Arabic. They might be able to help you understand the material better" Negative Aspect is that they might seem as if they are more advanced or ahead of you and make you feel behind.*

*"When the heritage students want to be there, they are an asset. When they are just there to get the requirement over, they are a distraction for the teacher and the students who want to learn."*

*"Good because they help you out. Bad because class moves too fast and accommodates to heritage students more."*

The only negative answer was:

*"They start talking in their dialect regardless of the non-heritage students being there. You feel left out when they speak in other dialects such as Lebanese, Syrian, etc, because you can't understand what he/she is saying."*

Most heritage learners gave interesting responses and reacted positively when asked to comment on having non-heritage classmates. Words such “interesting”, “enjoyable” “nice” are found on almost every students’ comments. Examples of such responses are:

*“Interesting. I liked having no heritage speakers, they are funny and enjoyable and ask good questions.”*

*“It makes me feel good that other people want to learn my native language.”*

*“It’s good for non-native students because heritage students in the class can help non-heritage students with things they don’t know how to do. If they were isolated they would have more concentration planed onto them by the teacher.”*

*“It’s nice to see non-heritage having an interest learning a language that use to not be so popular or desirable.”*

When non-heritage students were asked if they like to work with heritage students as partners for group activities, three expressed a positive reaction and they commented on the fact that the heritage speakers would help them with the problems that they were having, especially with the spoken language. Their positive comments included the following:

*“I get to learn and interact with them in a new perspective.”*

*“There may be things that the heritage students may know more than me”.*

*“I wouldn’t mind if a heritage student corrects me when I make a mistake. I will actually be happy that he/she is willing to help me.”*

Two however expressed a negative reaction. One remarked that the heritage students tended to “clump together in class”, and that it was difficult to approach them. Another comment was: “I will learn and understand the work better instead of having the heritage student complete the work for me.”

All heritage learners, on the other hand, are proud of helping non-heritage learners, admire and enjoy their involvement in learning Arabic “I enjoy seeing non-heritage students learning the language and culture”; “I love working with them. I feel like I can tell them about my culture and language. Although it takes me a lot of patience”. The amiable personalities of the heritage speakers and their willingness to help their non-heritage classmates seem to be the reasons why the non-heritage students did not feel intimidated speaking in front of the heritage classmates. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement, “In general, I do not like speaking Arabic in front of my heritage classmates,” out of the five non-heritage students who answered this question, four disagreed that they did not like speaking in front of the heritage speakers; and one agree with the statement.

When asked if having a native or heritage student in the class is helpful, most of the non-native speakers responded “Yes” and expressed their opinions positively. Many non-native learners saw the benefit of native speakers in helping them with pronunciation and vocabulary. Among the positive comments are the following by three different subjects:

*“I appreciate having native speakers in the class because they correct my mistakes.”*

*“I always turn to my heritage learner’s classmates for more explanation. Sometimes the teacher goes fast or fails to explain well the grammar point, so the heritage learners are there to help.”*

*“I got a chance to know a lot of things that the teachers fail to deliver. Also I learn a lot of cultural details and expressions that I will never learn in class.”*

In general, the impact of native students on their non-native classmates was described to be positive. The non-native speakers did not seem to be intimidated by native speakers. On the contrary, all of them state that the willingness of native speakers classmates and their sense of community make them comfortable and in ease in the class. One of the non-native learners’ remark was that even some native speakers in this class had similar problems which made him feel more confident about his language skills. This is true

because most native Arabic students are exposed to Arabic at early age at home through their parents or to exposure to current Arabic television and radio shows. But this Arabic is the spoken Arabic that differs significantly from the pedagogical norm taught in the class. More importantly, the non-native learners were delighted to have cultural informants from Arabic-speaking students especially when they were asked if they like to work in groups with native learners. Having native or near-native learners in the same classroom offers important insight into Arabic culture. Arabic-speaking students from different Arab countries share with their classmates their culture and tradition.

### Pedagogical Challenges and Issues

A class composed of a mixture of native and non-native speakers of the target language presents pedagogical problems. Indeed findings of this study are on line with this claim. One of the challenges and problems encountered in this Arabic class is the range of language proficiencies of the students. A majority of heritage speakers in this class possess high proficiency level in Arabic and already have a command of basic syntactic structure, vocabulary, writing system, and reading needed for this level because they had studied Standard Arabic in their native countries (between 5 to 7 years) before coming to the U.S. Other heritage learners, however, possess some oral skills, and some knowledge of Arabic sounds and pronunciation, but lack skills in writing, and reading, and basic grammar. This is because they were introduced to the spoken Arabic at home since birth and not to Standard Arabic. Non-native speakers' level, on the other hand, was very low because this was only their second semester of Arabic. The task of the teacher in this situation is very difficult. Non-native speakers require more hours of instruction to develop the level of proficiency needed, however, native speakers need to learn the specific language skills required for specific situations and professional purposes (e.g., use of formal language registers).

Another pedagogical problem is the existing of two varieties of Arabic. In the case of Arabic, two varieties of Arabic are used in all Arabic countries – Classical Arabic or its modern version, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the dialect typical to each region. These two varieties of Arabic can be said to stand in a diglossic relationship, that is two varieties, of the same language existing side by side, each enjoying a particular status and fulfilling different sociolinguistic functions. MSA, having a written form, is the official language

of all Arab countries and used in official functions and formal situations. Being closely related to Classical Arabic, it is highly respected and has a higher status. On the other hand, a variety of dialects or colloquial Arabic different from one Arab part to another which is the mother tongue. It is the language of everyday conversation. It is not standardized and does not have a written form and compared to MSA it has a lower status. So which Arabic should be taught? Should students learn these two varieties of Arabic – MSA to read and write and speak formally, and one of the many colloquial forms of the language for informal speaking situations? Or should the dialect be taught only for practical purposes? If Yes which dialect? It was argued in fact by the National Foreign Language Center that to be fully functional in Arabic language, students should learn the two types of Arabic.

Another challenge is the complexity and difficulty of Arabic as a subject of study. Learning a new language with different phonetic sounds, grammatical structural can be challenging. The dissimilarity between Arabic and most Western European languages, such as English, French, German, and Spanish makes Arabic difficult language to learn. Arabic is a Semitic language and very different in structure from the Indo-European languages that English speakers commonly study.

The pedagogical teaching of Arabic and lack of appropriate instructional materials are the two further challenges identified in this study by these participants. Most students point out that a traditional instruction is followed such as dictations, grammar worksheets, and reading aloud. The instructor does not apply other pedagogical approaches that contribute to non-native students' development of oral fluency, and help heritage speakers maintaining and extending their proficiency in their native language. The students mentioned that the only book used throughout the class was "Al-Kitaab fii ta`alum ?al `arabiyya" and no authentic materials are used to enhance learning.

### **Some Pedagogical Suggestions:**

What does it take to ensure a quality less commonly taught languages instruction and achieve better instructional opportunities? A pedagogical proficiency-based approach that integrates successfully into the same classroom students of varying levels of proficiency and language exposure as well as both native and non-native students, that incorporates appropriate teaching materials,

and that motivate native speakers to maintain their language skills, and non-native learners to master their skills.

In most foreign language classes, instructors find themselves faced with classes in which an increasing percentage or even a majority of the students are not the traditional foreign language learners that they are not well trained for (Draper and Hicks, 2000, p.16). To integrate successfully into the same classroom students of varying levels of proficiency and language exposure as well as both native and non-native students, instructors should understand the linguistic backgrounds of the students who make up the class. Because most of students come from Arabic background, instructors should make an effort to find out which students have studied Arabic in their native countries or in the U.S. and/or speak it at home, and which Arabic dialect they speak. This will help instructors to place students in the appropriate course levels. Those students who have strong speaking, writing, and reading skills because of their previous exposure to the target language in their native countries or through community programs in the U.S. should be put into upper level classes. Those who know and speak the dialect and have never studied Standard Arabic are in a more complex situation. They may have a basic knowledge of Arabic sounds and an advantage in speaking and conversing in the spoken Arabic, but their proficiency in Modern Standard Arabic is usually minimal. Students need to realize that the spoken and written are not necessarily mean being literate. Having these types of students may be a problem for non-native speakers but being armed with greater language awareness, instructors can work with students to cultivate a supportive and dynamic learning environment for all. They have to take full advantage of the rich personal, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of the students to construct a context for creative and meaningful discourse. According to Blyth (1995) despite the differences in the students' L2 proficiency, instructors have to create a sense of belonging (p. 170). Bialystock and Hakuta, 1994, p. 203) add that native or near-native speakers in the foreign language classroom can offer insights into the culture that are extremely valuable; their descriptions of firsthand experiences often leave lasting impressions on their classmates.

To motivate native speakers to maintain their language skills, and non-native learners to master their skills, instructors should provide appropriate comprehensible input in the target language in the formal classroom, and input

outside the class to improve language proficiency such as taking trips to the target country and culture, and watching TV (Cho and Krashen, 2000).

Using effective teaching materials that motivate native speakers to maintain their language skills, and non-native learners to master their skills is another pedagogical suggestion. Instructors should use materials in the class that discuss language diversity, linguistic variation, linguistic identities of various groups, and attitudes towards languages. Gutiérrez (1997) and Andrews (2000) claim that it is important and advantageous to integrate sociolinguistic topics into the curriculum. Pino and Pino (2000) found that students of Spanish greatly appreciated receiving material to help them understand Southwest Spanish and what makes it unique. The same should be done for Arabic. Students could be taught about the concept of diglossia, the status of Standard Arabic and its role as a language of national identity, and the different varieties of Arabic. Instructors should also use textbooks that focus on communication. They should teach vocabulary and appropriate grammatical points using various contextualized activities. Communicative exercises and activities that develop speaking skill should be opted for. Also teachers should use reading passages in the target language that deal with cultural aspects and issues and that encourage students to reflect on them and express their opinions. Other type of reading is also encouraged such as recreational reading suggested by Krashen (1998, 2001, and 2003). This consists for example of students' selecting interesting books that are of interest to them in the target language, read them, and then present them in the class. This type of reading outside classroom time stimulates tremendous progress and builds competence. Krashen also suggested recreational listening which consists of students' selecting interesting stories, TV shows, movies, and recorded radio programs. Students have to watch and listen to these programs which can be supplemented by recordings of fully proficient heritage language speakers made by students themselves on topics they find interesting (Krashen,1998). This approach also helps students to improve their listening skill after class.

## **Conclusion**

Even though Arabic was the only targeted language dealt with in this case study, and the sample of gathered data was small, the outcomes of this study make not only Arabic teachers and educators aware of pedagogical challenges encountered in such classrooms, but also teachers of other less

commonly taught languages. The study also makes an important contribution to teaching and learning less commonly taught languages and presents possible solutions and suggestions. More importantly, it serves as a model for other researchers who are interested in investigating various aspects of foreign and heritage language education. As more research of this type becomes available, language educators and teachers will be able to design programs and courses more effectively to suit the needs of their various student populations.

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