

## **WHY ARE YOU LEARNING ARABIC? ORIENTATIONS, MOTIVATION AND ACHIEVEMENT**

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*This is a case study of motivation to learn Arabic as a foreign language at the university level in the United States. Three students enrolled in second year Arabic were the participants. Data about each participant were collected through observation of weekly group conversations, and analysis of grade records for the whole semester during which the study took place. One 45 minute interview with each student was also conducted. The results of the study indicate that students' motivation and consequently their L2 achievement are better when the L2 learning process supports their language goals. Arabic being a non-European language poses higher difficulty to American learners than other foreign languages of Indo-European origin. Therefore, maintaining a positive motive all through the learning process becomes a paramount factor in language achievement. When students see that what they are learning in class is relevant to their goals, they are more likely to persist and exert extra effort. Such persistence is a key in learning an L2.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In addition to linguistic aptitude and intelligence, there is consensus in the field of SLA that learner affective variables play an important role in L2 learning. One of the most studied learner variables in L2 learning is motivation and how it influences achievement. (R. C. Gardner & Lambert, 1959), in their seminal work on the relationship between motivation and L2 achievement, clearly,

demonstrated how motivation to learn an L2 affects the level of L2 achievement. In particular, the study identified *integrative orientations*, characterized by a willingness to be like valued members of the target community, to correlate better to L2 achievement than *instrumental orientations*, characterized by willingness to learn L2 for personal gains such as job promotion. This paradigm of integrative versus instrumental orientations in the field of L2 learning has influenced most of the research done in the field of L2 learning.

However, in early 90s, SLA researchers started to question the adequacy of such a dichotomous classification of motivation especially in L2 as a foreign language contexts, calling for expanding the motivation model to incorporate context-relevant variables (Dornyei, 1994; Oxford & Shearin, 1994) . Motivation studies taking contextual variables into account demonstrated that instrumental orientations can be as influential and even sometimes superior to integrative motivations (R. Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991) . Such findings could be explained in light of relevancy of what kind of orientations students have in a certain context. For example, instrumental orientations can be more relevant and more tangible to learners than integrative ones when learning an L2 as a foreign language – no immediate native speaking community. (Warden & Hsiu, 2000) found integrative motivation to be less relevant for Taiwanese students of EFL. In that study, instrumental motivation was found to be the most important one followed by fulfilling degree requirement. With no immediate L2 community to wish to integrate with, L2 Students in foreign language contexts perceive an instrumental

value for their EFL class and associate English with career improvement in the future. In contrast, (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2000) found no correlation between instrumental orientations and effort in learning EFL by Lebanese students. Such conflicting findings lead us to rethink the construct of motivation in the field of L2 learning.

Demonstrating that orientations to learn L2 are context-dependent, (Belmechri & Hummel, 1998) suggested replacing integrative motivation with a new construct they called *positive motive*. The construct of *positive motive* is better suited to the concept of motivation in its broadest sense, because it can encompass different kind of orientations depending on the context in which L2 learning is taking place. In addition, it also includes attitudes toward the L2 culture. When those variables are combined with attitudes toward the learning situation, then motivation can better predict L2 achievement. Therefore, regardless of L2 learners' orientations, if a positive motive can be sustained throughout the learning process, it can lead to higher L2 achievement.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In this paper I will investigate the orientations of American students learning Arabic as a foreign language at a major university in the south. I will also try to identify the factors that keep students motivated during the process of L2 learning. In order to do so, I seek to answer these two questions:

- What are the different orientations of American students learning Arabic as a foreign language?

- What is the relation between orientations, L2 learning goals, and achievement of students learning Arabic as an L2?

## **METHOD**

A number of data collection methods have been used. I interviewed each one of the three participants for 45 minutes. The format of the interview was organized around key topics, but there were no lists of questions. Each interview was then transcribed. As a TA for the class, I conducted weekly conversation sessions for groups of four or five students in which the participants were taking part for which I kept a record. I also graded assignments, tests, and quizzes for the participants during the semester in which the study took place. At the end of the semester I looked at each participant interview, tests, quizzes, conversation grades in order to see any trends or relationships between students reasons to take Arabic and their actual performance in the course.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

- A. Smith is a 20 years old white male from a small town in north Texas. He has been studying Arabic for two years, and is planning on majoring in Middle Eastern studies. Besides learning Arabic, he also knows German, French and some Latin.
- B. Kate is a 32 years old white female from California. She started studying Arabic after the events of September 11. She registered in extension classes in California before she moved to University of Texas, where the study took place, to do graduate work in Middle

Eastern anthropology. She knows Italian, a little bit of Spanish, and a little bit of French.

- C. Donia is a 20 years old Muslim female of Pakistani descent from Chicago. She had exposure to Arabic since she was eight through her Islamic background. She grew up speaking Urdu at home and English at school. She considers herself a bilingual American.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

### ***1. Academic purposes***

The first major finding was that the reasons for studying Arabic varied. For example, Smith's interest in Arabic was purely academic. As a history student he debated with himself whether to learn Arabic or Chinese to support his research. He chose Arabic over Chinese because he wanted to make himself "remarkable with it" (excerpt from interview). He started learning Arabic before the 9/11 events. He dismissed the events of 9/11 as irrelevant to his decision to continue learning Arabic. However, Smith is aware of the fact the 9/11 events have made knowing Arabic more valuable from the point of view of the job market in the future. However, he dismissed the possibility of working for the government. Instead, when he graduates, he wants to volunteer some of his time serving the Arab American community.

Because Arabic is of a different language family (Semitic) than English (Indo-European), Smith found it the most difficult language that he had ever learned. In order to keep up with the pace of instruction and fulfill all the course

requirements, Smith spends about ten hours a week studying Arabic. He is satisfied with the progress of the course. In general, the course met his academic needs of learning Arabic. In other words, the kind of instruction he was getting met his professional goals of being able to read Arabic texts and analyze their content. Even, he wishes that there were more grammar teaching during class time. Compared to other students in the class, Smith achievement in the course was very high. (See Table 1).

## **2. Course offering not meeting goals**

Unlike Smith, Kate had never considered taking Arabic until after 9/11. She started learning Arabic while on a working visit to Italy immediately after the 9/11 events. Here is how she described her reasons:

I have considered just for my enjoyment studying a ME language, but I didn't seriously think about it until after 9/11.

Like Smith, Kate considers Arabic the most difficult L2 she had ever learned prompting her to spend more than ten hours a week studying Arabic. Halfway through the semester, when she noticed that her grades were slipping, she changed her registration to Credit/No Credit. By then, Kate started to realize that what the course is offering was not meeting her L2 goals. She had trouble understanding the language the teacher used and wished for a simpler approach:

I think more basic conversation will be more helpful cause then you, like, you are applying the words you are learning.

Because the textbook was organized in a fashion to target the development of speaking skills, Kate was satisfied with it more than the other two participants. She believed that the focus on speaking was a positive influence on her Arabic learning experience. She liked the book. She found it challenging but its not too hard.

Despite the fact that both Kate and Smith spend almost the same amount of time, and have similar L1 and even L2 backgrounds, it is clear that smith's motivation did not suffer as the course progressed. He saw the value of what he is learning and could relate it to his academic goals. On the other hand Kate was frustrated with the level of the language used in the class, and wished for more basic conversational Arabic that would be relevant to her future work or travel in the Middle East.

### ***3. Cultural identity***

Donia's relationship with Arabic extends beyond the college academic requirements or political interest. She grew up a bi-lingual speaker of Urdu and English. She spoke Urdu at home and English "outside". As a child she was interested in learning Arabic so that she would be able to "say a prayer" in Arabic. It bothered her that she attended the Mosque but could not read or understand Arabic. Her reason for learning Arabic was religious. She felt something akin to spiritual in her need to know the language. She tried to explain the feeling like this:

There is something (about Arabic) that is ME...I was involved with (a religious sect) and I was conscious that I was thinking and talking about it...

Closely linked to this deep spiritual attraction She believed that “Arabic was beautiful language and spoke about “the great way it flows”. She also said that she felt “the color of the culture” and that was the reason that brought her to Arabic. However, she appeared to struggle with notions of identity. Donia was from Pakistan and belonged to a different type of Muslim religious sect. In high school she admitted that she did not have minority friends. She was “very American”. Yet, as she grew older, she apparently began to develop identity struggles. She describes her situation like this:

I have a big conflict being an American but also being Muslim...and then...being from Pakistan and being a different type of Muslim (Ismaili) I felt that I couldn't relate to other Muslims because of my sect, “

There was a sense of not belonging to any cultural group. Learning Arabic culture seemed to be more appealing to Donia. She was more interested in learning “everyday expressions, objects.” Donia seemed to accept the theory that learning a second language as an adult was more difficult than learning it as a child. She learned about the critical period in a psychology class and although she admitted that learning a language as a college was more complicated and that Arabic is a difficult language and that the textbook she used had flaws. She said:



The grammar in the book is very difficult....it doesn't explain everything, and for example they will introduce things that they haven't discussed in the grammar.

She does not realize that she probably has learned well and that her goal of learning to read the Quran is a very difficult and challenging one. Perhaps she should have spoken to her teacher to learn more about learning Arabic in general. For example, that it cannot be compared to learning Spanish, which she did, and that it is listed as one of the most difficult languages for Americans to learn. Donia's should have sought help in setting her goals. Clearly she was motivated more by learning Arabic culture and may have profited more by enrolling in a course that offered more cultural instruction.

### ***Students' Achievement***

The table below shows the breakdown and total of grades for each participant throughout the semester. There were four tests carrying 40% of the final grade, eight quizzes carrying 20% of the final grade, twenty one half hour sessions of small group conversation (4-5 students in each group) carrying 30% of the final grade, and twenty one homework assignments carrying 10% of the final grade.

Looking at the final grades presented in Table 1, we notice that Smith had the highest score (87), followed by Donia (80). Kate has the lowest score (78). If we take the test scores to be the most objective and standardized tool of assessment the results were the same: Smith received the best scores in quizzes and homework assignments, which is not surprising giving his total dedication to the study of Arabic. The most fluctuating pattern is that of Donia who scored the highest on the conversation test but was unable to maintain the

same high scores on tests and quizzes. Donia had the advantage of exposure to Arabic and interacting with Arabs at an early age, which allowed her to participate more in conversations. However, her scores on the tests and quizzes may indicate her lack of motivation to invest more time preparing for those tasks. The differences in achievement between Smith and Kate on both the tests and the quizzes could be explained by the nature of the items on the test. Most of these items targeted grammatical knowledge of Arabic. Smith who has a clear academic interest in written Arabic may have seen more value for studying grammar than Kate who is interested in speaking the language. Such an explanation is further supported by the very close scores of both Smith, 26, and Kate, 25, in the conversation tests. Kate's interest in speaking skills may have prompted her to study more preparing for conversation sessions than she did for grammar-based measures such as tests and quizzes.

Table 1. Students' grades

Name	Tests (40)	Quizzes (20)	Conversation (30)	Homework (10)	Total (100)
Smith	36	15	26	10	87
Donia	33	11	27	9	80
Kate	31	12	25	10	78

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study seem to contradict other findings on motivation and L2 achievement on more than one level. First, integrative orientations do not seem to guarantee higher achievement. For example, though Donia identifies a great deal with Arabic culture as part of her self-identity, her achievement record puts her below that of Smith who clearly has no intention of integrating with the

target culture. Second, instrumental orientation as well is not a good indicator of higher achievement. Though Kate has a clear instrumental orientation to learn Arabic- marketability after 9/11- still she was not able to persist and cross to the next level of L2 learning. Compared to the other two participants of this study, her achievement was the lowest.

The findings support research calling for expanding the L2 motivation model to take into account context of learning. Orientations explain the reason why L2 students are learning the language, but may not be good enough to predict L2 achievement. Out of these orientations, students develop L2 linguistic goals- grammar, reading, communication, translation, etc. Students who are experiencing a match between their goals and class instruction will become positively motivated through the learning process. On the other hand, students who feel that their L2 goals are not being met in the L2 learning process will become frustrated. In the absence of strong positive motive learners will perceive their goals as less achievable. More importantly dissatisfaction can lead to negative attitudes which will affect learning strategies.(Ames & Archer, 1988) found positive attitude toward a class to be related to continued interest in a subject. Therefore, its seems that the presence positive motive will lead to better learning and coping strategies which will lead to higher achievement.

Therefore, if we think of motivation as a process that starts with orientation increases with goal setting and goal achievement, results in learner satisfaction, and finally leads to higher L2 achievement, then we may be able to explain each

of these three cases. (Noels, Clement, & Pelletier, 2001) concluded that successful L2 learners are not only those who are inclined to integrate with the target group, but also those who enjoy L2 learning as well as those who perceive achievement in L2 important to achieve personal goals in life. (Dickinson, 1995) identified intrinsic motivation to be an important actor for learning as intrinsically motivated students will perform an activity because they enjoy doing it rather than for external rewards such as grades or praise. (Ryan & Deci, 2000) eloquently summed up the relationship between the environment and intrinsic motivation in this statement.

Classroom and home environments can facilitate or forestall intrinsic motivation by supporting versus thwarting the needs of autonomy and competence (2000, p 59).

In this study, the classroom environment supported Smith's autonomy and feeling of competence, which in turn satisfied his needs, but the same environment did not support the feeling of autonomy and competence of both Kate and Donia. Therefore, they may have become less intrinsically motivated. A closer look at the data shows a path that supports autonomy and competency that leads to meeting students' L2 linguistic goals. If we fail to address those goals directly that will result in apathy and dissatisfaction. For example, Donia's attitudes and perceptions of the class were low. As a consequence her achievement suffered. The mismatch between perceived goals and the learning situation led to dissatisfaction, which then distanced the learner from working

harder to achieve those goals. On the other hand, Smith's linguistic goal of being able to read texts in Arabic was met by the type of instruction he received from the class. He developed a sense of satisfaction and positive attitude that translated into enjoying learning a difficult language like Arabic. In contrast, Kate did not develop a sense of enjoyment in learning Arabic and was more concerned with her grade prompting her to change her grade to Credit/No-Credit. Even though both Kate and Smith exerted almost the same amount of time studying Arabic (ten hours per week) we see that there is a big difference in their achievement. Therefore, effort and time alone did not seem to explain the difference.

**IMPLICATIONS:**

Learning Arabic as an L2 is an overwhelming task for two different reasons. First, genetically Arabic is a completely different language from English. Second, Diglossia in the case of Arabic presents teachers, institutes, and students with conflicting goals, priorities and interests. Should teachers teach Arabic as spoken by Arabs? If so, which dialect? Or should they teach only literary Arabic? If so, what literacy, Classical or Modern? These are difficult choices that students may have to know about ahead so that mid-way thru the semester they do not become disengaged from the learning process because they see no immediate value from what they are learning.

Younes, (1999) adopted an innovative solution to accommodate both spoken and written Arabic. He calls his method the 'integrated approach'.

According to this approach students will be exposed to both dialect and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The book uses Levantine Arabic for listening and speaking activities, and Modern Standard Arabic for reading and writing activities. However, such an approach may solve part of the problem because sometimes we have students who are interested in learning Arabic for literary purposes only with little interest in colloquial Arabic. A more comprehensive solution would be to give students the choice to learn the kind of Arabic they need to meet their needs. This can be done by offering different Arabic courses with different linguistic emphases from the early stages of teaching Arabic.

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## **APPENDIX A**

Motivation processes in L2 learning  
(created by Ghassan Hussenieali)

