

Lessons from Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* for Today's Foreign Language Teacher

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Abstract

The *Muqaddimah*, a massive 14th century text by Arab historian Ibn Khaldun, while primarily a history, in the later chapters deals with linguistics and pedagogy. Multiple publications on what his work contributes to the field of education exist. But surprisingly, only two papers have appeared specific to teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL): one decades old, the other primarily arguing an early case for communicative language teaching (CLT) is presented. Ibn Khaldun lived in a kind of global world, an Islamic one: cosmopolitan, and having its own international language. Analogies with today's globalism and English are obvious. This article therefore reviews the total *Muqaddimah*, comparing its content to dominant ideas and figures in contemporary English language teaching (ELT), and showing it is still relevant to ELT. Congruences include Ibn Khaldun's constructivist-like conception of identity and realization of second language learner (L2) identity's role and formation process. Also, what would today be called Whorfianism, leading to concluding a language should be taught together with its discourses—but English is no longer viewed as just Anglo-American or native-speaker—Ibn Khaldun's case is saved by reimagining English as global and cosmopolitan, which TESOL exactly has. It will also be shown that not CLT, but rather study abroad or immersion education is being portrayed. The importance of affect, a case made for both learner and teacher autonomy, together with other issues, all current in TESOL today, make Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* a rediscovered source of inspiration for the milieu of modern ELT.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, Ibn Khaldun, immersion, *Muqaddimah*, TESOL

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Introduction

Ibn Khaldun is probably most well-known as having been called the father of sociology and as a historian. He is less well known for his views on education and linguistics, and specifically his ideas about language education, which make up much of the latter part of the *Muqaddimah*.

While a number of articles have been published on how the *Muqaddimah* might apply to educational pedagogy (Halstead, 2004; Dajani, 2015; Maniam, 2016; Takayama et al., 2016; Demir, 2017; Khanday, 2018; Rahmani, Abdussalam, & Nuryani, 2020), this is not so for application to TESOL. Only two prior authors have published on Ibn Khaldun's ideas on language teaching. John (1989) criticizes Ibn Khaldun's view of L1 interference, lauds his ideas on use of literature for language learning, and agrees with the apparent promotion of communicative language teaching (CLT) together with skepticism about grammar teaching. Osman (2003) too portrays Ibn Khaldun as an early advocate of CLT.

The purpose of this article is to update and look more broadly than the two previous researchers in ELT have at how Ibn Khaldun congrues with the TESOL of today—as he lived in a cosmopolitan and Islamic form of a global world himself, complete with its own lingua franca, it is hard not to see an analogy with globalism today and English. The method by which this will be done is comparing ideas from the total *Muqaddimah* with dominant positions and figures in contemporary TESOL. In doing so, it will also be argued, or clarified, contra John (1989) and particularly Osman (2003), that Ibn Khaldun did not have CLT in mind, but something more like what we would call studying abroad, homestay, or immersion learning in his writing in the *Muqaddimah*.

Ibn Khaldun is a paradoxical figure. On the one hand, he had incredibly modern knowledge and cosmopolitan political views, for instance, he knew the circumference of the Earth about as accurately as it is known today and had lived and worked across the Islamic world. But at the same time, he believed in religious dogmatism, and wrote at length about numerology and sorcery.

The book is divided into a first part which is a geography; Ibn Khaldun was aware of lands all the way from Britain to Korea, though not of what lay in the southern hemisphere about which he speculates. The second part is a history of Islamic civilization, and explicates his theory of history, which is cyclical, somewhat similar to that in Spengler (1923/1926). The third part covers Ibn Khaldun's linguistics, philosophy of education, and ideas on language teaching. What makes Ibn Khaldun's ideas about language education so pertinent to us today is his having lived in a kind of precursor to our global world, an Islamic global world: extending from Central and South-East Asia to West Africa and into Western Europe. That international and cosmopolitan world had a common language: Arabic, of which Ibn Khaldun was a language teacher, materials developer, and pedagogical theorist.

The only translator to put the *Muqaddimah* into English was Rosenthal, whose initial set of volumes appeared in 1958; all republications and abridgements appearing until today are based on his work. The chapter and section numbering of that first and only translation have been retained by nearly every publisher, even the recent and abridged First Princeton Classics edition (1377/2015). The *Muqaddimah* is a classic work, all citations throughout this article therefore

preserve those chapter and section numberings [in square brackets], hopefully making quotes easy to locate, as opposed to if only page numbers of a particular edition were given.

The *Muqaddimah* and TESOL Today

Cultural Competency

Cultural sensitivity and inclusivity have become monolithic issues in TESOL in recent years (Byram, 2013). Given the extraordinary importance this has taken on, before going any further, some of the attitudes Ibn Khaldun expresses ought to be addressed. None of the previous publications on the *Muqaddimah* in education or TESOL have confronted this, perhaps not wanting to detract from his progressive ideas, but in the interest of transparency, they must be mentioned.

Ibn Khaldun's (1377/1958) comments on Black Africans would be considered grossly racist by today's standards [I.3rd]: He says that they go naked and have a disposition similar to "dumb animals", he also makes accusations of cannibalism (p. 123). He goes on [I.4th], characterizing Black people as "stupid" and easily overtaken by musical rhythm (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 127). He even legitimizes enslaving Blacks [II.23], saying that the peoples of the Black nations tend towards being submissive, and since they do not have much in common with humans, but are more like animals, their being made slaves is justified (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 197).

Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) also makes blatantly anti-Semitic comments [VI.39]: he writes that Jews have acquired a bad reputation far and wide, and across many periods of time, what they are specifically known for is said to be "insincerity and trickery" (p. 730).

Ibn Khaldun's (1377/1958) conception of Islam is not what all Muslims today believe. He makes the comment that [III.31], members of the Muslim community have a duty to wage religious war for the purpose of converting everyone to the religion, by force if necessary (p. 303). That might even be called Islamophobic by some.

His views on homosexuality were not tolerant either, rather different from where ELT is today ("Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Trans (LGBT)", 2018). He saw it as a social disease of corrupt and decadent cultures, that can eventually lead to the end of humanity. He argues that city life [IV.18], to its detriment, is characterized by luxury and the pursuit of pleasure: and one of those pleasures is engaging in diverse forms of sexual expression, "such as ... homosexuality" (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 470).

By way of contextualization, it might be worth noting that these sorts of extraordinarily bigoted remarks are not limited to just those quoted above, but are also made about White people [I.3rd], and perhaps significantly—about Arabs too, of whom Ibn Khaldun considers himself one: writing that Arabs are the most savage of anyone [II.2], comparing the Arab people to wild, predatory animals (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 162). That all said: he did not believe that savagery or civility were innate characteristics of peoples, i.e., that some people are inherently superior or inferior to others, instead he thought that [II.1], the differences among us are the consequence of the many different environments and ways in which we live (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 161).

Second Language Acquisition

This matter of Ibn Khaldun speaking pejoratively of Blacks, Jews, and homosexuals can actually serve as a lead-in to understanding his ideas about second language acquisition (SLA) and identity. On the one hand he had a *tabula rasa* idea of human nature [II.4], no one is born good or evil, our interactions with the world leave their mark on us: “Muhammad said: “Every infant is born in the natural state. It is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian”” (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 165). However, no one persists in this blank slate condition. Identity forms as habits accrue in social situations. To reiterate, for Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958), it is not because of innate character that anyone is who they are, instead [II.5], “man is a child of the customs and the things he has become used to. He is not the product of his natural disposition and temperament” (p. 167). This conception bears some resemblance to contemporary social constructivist thinking about identity (Hall, 1996), which has widely been taken onboard by TESOL (Block, 2009, 2010).

Ibn Khaldun's conception of language learning follows from this importance he puts on habit. He sees language as a craft, or a habit. It is a physical craft, like carpentry—only with language, we learn with our tongue. Both speaking and writing too are conceived of as crafts in the *Muqaddimah*. To paraphrase, Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) describes crafts as [V.15]: habits of bodily actions which are developed and perfected through practice (p. 505).

His idea of language acquisition is set within the same terminology [VI.45], “language is a technical habit.... Languages are habits similar to crafts” (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 752). So, in SLA, since language is a habit, and a physical one, not something abstract, according to Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958), that is how second languages have got to be learned [V.15], habits are not acquired through taking in information, but being crafts, language learning needs to be taught by teachers with that fact in mind (p. 505).

Ibn Khaldun's theory of SLA supports his views on language learner motivation. A comparison can be drawn with the concept of social and language capital in Bourdieu (1991), it is Norton (2013) who is most associated with transferring these theories across into ELT. Second language learners, Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) states, desire to associate themselves with the power and prestige of the conqueror [II.22], this includes fashion, lifestyle, and culture (p. 196). It extends also to the language, accent, and discourses of the language.

Education is Political

Ibn Khaldun purposefully brings issues of power into his ideas of language learning because for him: education is political. His teachings are representative of the view that “the educational system of any society should be formulated according to its ideology” (Maniam, 2016, p. 117). For Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958), the whole purpose of the teacher's efforts are to enable the learner to be able to submit himself to the religiopolitical order taught in the Quran [VI.38], which is the foundation for all habits the learner will eventually acquire (p. 727). But he adds an amusing caveat, or warning, that teachers are [VI.41], “*of all people, those least familiar with the ways of politics....* Accustomed to dealing with matters of the mind ... they do not know anything else” (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 733).

Contrastive Rhetoric

But to be able to appreciate the Quran, bare understanding of the classical Arabic words is not enough [VI.10], the Quran is the product of revelations that include both the language of the Arabs of the time, but also of “their rhetorical methods” (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 565). A learner needs to know the words, but also the rhetorical style of the culture; this was first promoted in TESOL by Kaplan (1966) as “contrastive rhetoric”. While interest in contrastive rhetoric has waxed and waned since his initial publication, the topic is still active in thinking about ELT (Walker, 2010; Hernandez & Genuino, 2017). Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) applies the notion to language teaching [VI.44], just knowing the words and their definitions and a familiarity with collocations is insufficient, learning authentic use is needed too (p. 745).

The implication for TESOL is that a language cannot be disconnected from its texts and its discourses. Hence, Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) thinks well of what he calls the Spanish approach where language was taught together with Arab culture and texts [VI.36]: “Instruction in poetry, composition, and Arabic philology gave them, from their early years on, a habit providing ... better acquaintance with the Arabic language” (p. 728). This view is today called Whorfianism, language and culture together form an interconnected entity. In the *Muqaddimah* this is taken a bit further, so language, culture, spiritual tradition, ethnicity, and the environment are all interconnected.

Native-speakerism

Native-speakerism has taken a lot of criticism today from people like Holliday (2006) who coined the term, or earlier from Kachru (1985) who has promoted “Englishes”: Indian English, Singaporean English, and so on. Ibn Khaldun would on the surface appear not to be sympathetic to their view. He goes so far as to say that maybe if someone even does not pronounce their prayers in the dialect of the ancient Bedouins, (a debate that still exists in the Ummah today), those prayers are invalid [VI.46]: “Failure to pronounce the q in the first *surah* (as it is pronounced by present-day Bedouins) invalidates one's prayer” (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 756).

The difficulty of learning a foreign language Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) explains in terms of his theory of crafts and language as a habit [V.21], “*the person who has gained the habit of a particular craft is rarely able afterwards to master another*” (p. 512). He sums up his entire position and its implications for language teaching with an analogy [VI.50]: He asks the reader to imagine a child who grows up with Arab Bedouins, quite automatically this child learns the language together with all the correct vowel endings, yet the child knows nothing of the rules of grammar. Everything he learned through habit. But what about those who did not have this sort of upbringing? For them to learn the language accurately, they will need exposure and practice, but also to become acquainted with the habits of interacting, poems, and discourses of the language's speakers—just studying the grammar won't result in the kind of fluency the child raised by Arab Bedouins has (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 765).

So, on two different levels, Ibn Khaldun promotes a purist view of the teaching of the Arabic language. On one level, learners desire to associate themselves with the power and prestige of the international language, they ought not be taught a corrupted form, and furthermore, on a second level, because language is nested in culture, spiritual tradition, ethnicity, and environment, it can't

really be disconnected from those things, (the same argument appears elsewhere in the *Muqaddimah* too [VI.45]).

Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) writes [VI.50]: “They say that “the Arabs speak (correct Arabic) by nature”” (p. 764). This is identical to how Chomsky (1965) had come to see linguistic correctness too. But native-speakerism has fallen out of favor in TESOL. Ibn Khaldun might be saved, and his writing kept relevant to contemporary ELT, by seeing English today and its speakers and discourses, not as Anglo-American, but as the cosmopolitan global community.

Grammar Teaching and Materials

Therefore, given his seeing of language as a practical craft, and connected with its discourses, it follows that Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) was critical of those who teach relying over heavily on grammar instruction [VI.49]: Knowledge of the rules is a knowledge of how to use them, but it is not the actual use of them” (p. 761). Purely linguistic knowledge which lacks discourse knowledge leaves language competence deficient. He goes on, making the point even more strongly [VI.49], explaining that we may encounter people with a superb ability to express themselves, even in poetry, but totally lacking any idea of “the rules of Arabic philology”, therefore, the teaching of grammar can be completely given up (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 761). This was of course the view promoted by Krashen (1982) in TESOL.

Ibn Khaldun was not only a teacher of language but he also wrote textbooks, so he advises this same principle be applied in the design of teaching materials. He praises the materials developer Sibawayh [VI.49] for incorporating the development of linguistic habit, as well as authentic texts, and even poetry, not just the study of “grammatical rules” (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 761). So, Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) argues, those who haven't grown up with Arabs, can best learn the language through becoming closely familiar with their texts, discourses, and linguistic habits [VI.49]: this is achieved through “close personal contact” and exposure to the habits of expression, turns of speech, and linguistic manner of the target language's speakers (p. 762).

This it seems is beyond, different from, and much stronger than CLT, as John (1989) or especially Osman (2003) had seen in the *Muqaddimah*. Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) opines [VI.40]: “*Education is greatly improved by traveling in quest of knowledge and meeting the ... teachers....* Human beings obtain their knowledge and character qualities and all their opinions and virtues either through study, instruction, and lectures, or through imitation of a teacher and personal contact with him...” (p. 732). While similar to CLT as classically described (Canale & Swain, 1980), Ibn Khaldun, it is here argued, is suggesting instead something more like what we know today as immersion schooling, studying abroad, English camps, homestay, and the like: interacting closely with speakers of the language and getting to know their texts and discourse firsthand.

Second Language Identity

Ibn Khaldun's view of identity has already been introduced. His perspective can probably most easily be understood in terms of what is today called Traditionalism, for example in the sense of Guénon (1942/2004). In the *Muqaddimah*, identity is presented as being composed of the five elements, already mentioned: firstly, language. Secondly culture: the meaning, way of life, and the discourses and texts of a people. Thirdly is ethnicity, Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) writes [II.9], only

among the Arabs of the desert have lineages remained pure and unmixed (p. 173). A fourth aspect is spiritual tradition, i.e., identity as a religious group [II.26]. The fifth part is the environment or land [III.7], the people who establish a dynasty are necessarily living on and in possession of the lands, up to its borders (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 216).

These common elements composing identity create “group feeling”, which is a strong sense of group belonging and cohesion: this is a key concept in the sociology of the *Muqaddimah*. Ibn Khaldun does not hold a materialist conception of history. Group feeling really has nothing to do with anything external like a technological advantage, and not even a cultural one. It is an internal feeling [II.22], it would be a mistake to think that “the superiority of the victor” has something to do with culture or way of living, the strength of a peoples comes from “group feeling” (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 196); said very clear and direct [II.11], “superiority results from group feeling” (p. 176). The *Muqaddimah* goes on to explain that those rich in group feeling establish their power through leveraging violence to enforce their superiority [III.23], something that will “express the wrathfulness and animality (of human nature)” (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 256). These attitudes may be surprising to people of modern temperament, but they help to appreciate how Ibn Khaldun views identity, and second language (L2) identity formation.

Although we may originally be born into one or another group, Ibn Khaldun grants it is possible for someone to take on a new identity. This happens, he explains, as does language acquisition itself: through development of close connection with that other group [II.10], someone becomes so familiar with it, they become identified with a group other than the one into which they were born (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 175). Given the general rejection in contemporary TESOL that English is something Anglo-American (Holliday, 2006), to preserve the relevance of L2 identity theory in the *Muqaddimah*, it could be that cosmopolitan global identity is the group which today's English learner connects with (Ryan, 2009).

Motivation and Affect: Autonomy

Despite that Ibn Khaldun is conservative-minded and traditionalist, he does not advocate any kind of strictness in learning. A learner's emotional life is presented as importantly influencing education in the *Muqaddimah*, just as it was feeling that Ibn Khaldun saw as founding identity and also specifically L2 identity. There are some parallel's with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis: negative emotions in the classroom interfering with language learning. If a teacher is over-strict with a student, or if learning is not carefully paced and scaffolded, the learner cannot be happy about learning the language, instead, he will associate that bad experience with his learning. This fact is also represented as one of the three self guides in Dörnyei's (2005) L2 self model. As Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) describes ill-conceived lesson planning [VI.36], it actually confuses the learner and exposes him to lessons he is not yet prepare for, thus making a negative impression of language learning, and therefore not something the learner would like to be engaged in (p. 721).

Closely connected to this, when a learner does not have autonomy over his studies, that is emotionally demoralizing. This is not different from contemporary thinking in TESOL (Mynard & Ludwig, 2014). Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) highly valued learner centeredness wherein students were free, and not in what amounts to being in the position of having been conquered [VI.39]: If

learners feel oppressed they will have no interest in learning, this is noted to be true of anyone whose life has fallen under the control of some other authority (p. 730).

But Ibn Khaldun does not stop there; it is not only the learner who needs autonomy, but the teacher too. Ibn Khaldun himself was educated outside of institutions and he and his teachers had freedom about how they studied, the materials, and organization of the course. To fully appreciate these points about learner centeredness and teacher autonomy it helps to understand the *Muqaddimah*'s notion of cycles of history. A free and wild people initiate the cycle by conquering a docile, soft, decadent, and demoralized sedentary urban population. These conquerors reinvigorate the civilization. But before long, the once free-spirited conquerors become corrupted by urban life, and they too lose purpose and vigor, and the civilization declines—until some other wild and free people appear to conquer the urban centers, again, and the cycle continues. Hence, Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958) has a negative view of city-life, imperialism, and the authoritarian and stultifying institutions found therein [II.6], “governmental and educational laws destroy fortitude, because their restraining influence is something that comes from outside” (p. 169). So, something like Kumaravadivelu (1994) has it, the best learning can happen when teachers are at their freedom in organizing and implementing their lessons too.

Other Issues in TESOL

Given his respect for autonomy in learning, it is not surprising that Ibn Khaldun also promotes creativity. His ideas on this point are maybe not too different from TESOL figures like Maley and Peachey (2015). Learners are encouraged to let their creativity flow and follow their passion [VI.36]: Teachers ought sometimes to put aside all the “technical procedures” and let the native powers of the mind go wherever the learners’ desires take them (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 723).

Many of the other issues in TESOL the *Muqaddimah* touches on have been published by John (1989) but are worth briefly reviewing here. Vocabulary based curriculum is spoken favorably of by Ibn Khaldun (1377/1958), he suggests using what today is called a learner’s dictionary [VI.44]. He was also aware of the power etymology can have to multiply learners’ vocabulary [VI.44]. Attention is given as well to issues of phonology [VI.44], “the sequence of the positions (in throat and mouth) in which the various sounds are produced” (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/1958, p. 744). And consistent with Ibn Khaldun’s (1377/1958) general view of language being inseparable from discourse and context, he stressed studying metaphor and idiom [VI.44], “entitled *Asas al-balaghah* ... Az-Zamakhshari explains in it all the words used metaphorically by the Arabs.... It is a highly useful work” (p.745).

Conclusion

While it might be difficult for some modern readers to at all connect with things like Ibn Khaldun’s illiberal politics, intolerance, superstition, and religious dogmatism and chauvinism, nonetheless, the Islamic world of his day represents a sort of early form of globalism, complete with an international language. Therefore, the ideas on language learning presented in the *Muqaddimah* deserve our attention as we too live in a cosmopolitan global world with a common international language: English. Furthermore, Ibn Khaldun’s writings are broadly consistent with contemporary thinking in TESOL on a host of key topics. These include: a social constructivist-like view that identity is acquired, not innate, appreciating the value of linguistic capital, seeing that education is politically charged, discussing what would today be called Whorfianism, and

advocating therefore that language learning be enmeshed with the discourses of the target language, which today would be global cosmopolitan English, not specifically the English of Anglo-American native-speakers. He also recognized the role of what is called L2 identity in TESOL today, theorizing about its formation. He noted the importance of affect in language learning, and valued both learner and teacher autonomy, as well as numerous other issues current in TESOL today. Among those is CLT, and while previous authors have portrayed Ibn Khaldun as promoting it, it has been shown here that what he wrote on is closer to what we would today call immersion education or study abroad. So, while having been written in the 14th century, the *Muqaddimah* remains amazingly relevant to contemporary TESOL.

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