

Literacy Acquisition among Arab ESL Students 1

Dr. Gamil Alamrani¹

Abstract

This is an ethnographic study of Arab ESL students that describes the social and cultural context of their literacy acquisition at the University of Arkansas. I examine the power relations that define this minority group in three environments outside school: the Mosque, the Arabian School, and the University of Arkansas Student Union. Then, I explain how these relations shape, transform, and sometimes threaten their cultural identities in the classroom. Unlike earlier studies that describe Arab ESL population as homogeneous and identical, my research argues the diversity of their experience, the differing processes of their identity formation, and their varied perspectives about schooling and life in their L2 environment. The study shows how factors such as age, experience and the length of stay at L2 environment, affect Arab students' views regarding learning processes, teachers, texts, etc. The study concludes with some pedagogical implications that facilitate teaching and learning among this ESL group.

Keywords: ESL Acquisition, ESL Literacy, Arab Students, Multicultural Education, Teacher Education

Introduction

Recent literacy studies expand the definition of literacy to include several social and cultural variables that contextualize the teaching-learning process. Au, for example, (1993) observes that "literacy practices are very much a part of culture" (p. 34), and Gee (1990) emphasizes that "literacy has no effects--indeed, no meaning--apart from the particular cultural contexts in which it is used, and it has different effects in different contexts" (pp. 61-62). Accordingly, this study analyzes the social and cultural conditions that surround the process of literacy acquisition among Arab ESL students at the University of Arkansas. I examine the power relations that define this minority group in three different locations outside school and describe how these relations shape, transform, and sometimes threaten the students' cultural identities in the classroom. I also describe some of their fears, hopes, and stereotypes, helping teachers of this group recognize when there is a cultural problem and how to solve it in a culturally sensitive fashion. Minority groups generally lack a sense of "recognition" from the dominant culture. Hegel (1931), describing the psychology of the oppressed in his *Phenomenology of the Mind*, argues that for any individual to have a human identity, there must exist a sense of recognition of this identity by others in his or her society. This recognition can be absent, or rather unbalanced among different social groups. Minorities have to recognize the existence of the majority, while their own identities, most of the time, remain questioned or unnoticed. Consequently, as they work to exist within the dominant culture, they reshape some of their social and cultural identities in accordance with the hegemony of the majority, beginning with a total compliance to the subversive supremacy of the new linguistic system, their L2, in this case, English. Not only do they need to speak and perform most of their daily routines in English, rather they change the ways they think, feel and express themselves. Ahmed (1992) argues: The liberal university is usually, for the nonwhite student, a place of desolation, even panic; exclusions are sometimes blatant, more often only polite and silent, and the documents of one's culture become little sickles to clear one's way through spirals of refined prejudice.

¹ Director of academics,, Dept. of English, Assis. Prof. of Comp. Lit. & Cultural Studies, Jazan University.

Most such students never quite manage to break through these ambiguities of enticement and blockage; some return, but many get lost in the funhouse of disagreeable habitations and impossible returns. (p. 84) Examples of these exclusions can be seen in the way their names, dress, behaviors, rituals, social and religious activities are perceived by the dominant culture. Moreover, their L2 schooling is usually contextualized within the dominance of L2 culture and politics. Street (1995) defines this literacy as a "Dominant Literacy...where some degree of indigenous differentiation of power and control means that the recipients of literacy campaigns are in practice experiencing 'foreign' cultural forms" (p. 37). Therefore, minorities are always in a process of negotiation between their home cultures and what the dominant school culture dictates. At the University of Arkansas, student minority groups make up to 14.3 % of the total enrollment: students from foreign countries 5.8%, African Americans 5.2%, Hispanics 3.5%, Asian Americans 2.4%, American Indians 1.7%, and Hawaiians 1.7% (Voorhies, 2011). They respond to the dominant culture of school in many ways and forms, ranging from an almost total resistance to an unexpected approval of it. Those who resist (in some cases, it is only some members within a particular group) see in the dominant culture a threat to their existing social and cultural identities (for example, the identity of a religiously conservative Muslim student); therefore, they attempt to avoid contact with the majority. They adhere to their cultural traditions, use their L1 for most of their daily activities, and live in as much cultural isolation from the dominant culture as possible. Generally, this avoidance results in literacy resistance in school as well. In the later sections, the study explains how this avoidance is manifested in some of the students' responses to collaboration and study groups. On the other hand, some minorities, or a few members in a particular minority group, accept and sometimes even celebrate the dominance of the majority and subsequently adapt their local social and cultural identities to find a place in the "new" culture. They keenly acquire the new linguistic system, eventually to the neglect of their L1, drastically change their looks and behaviors, and compromise most, if not all, of their social and cultural identities.

Arab Students

Arabs make a distinctive minority in the United States in many respects. They are widely misrepresented in the dominant mainstream culture, and their cultural and religious identities are frequently attacked in public discourses and the media. This discourse of representations of the Orient (Arabs and Muslims in particular) is not a new one. Edward Said (1978) argues that the western image of East, the "other," has always been a history of representations and misrepresentations. He claims that this history is mostly a creation of the western mind, or at least a political appropriation of eastern history, culture, and art to serve the interests of the westerners' realization and definition of the self, as well as an extension of economic and political power. The Orient, according to Said, is "a fragment of a text" (p. 177). Easterners are depicted as weak and cowardly, illiterate and uncultured, primitive and undisciplined, emotional and hyper-sexual, and most emphatically, dark, mysterious, and exotic. Arabs and Muslims are presented as anti-Semitic and anti-American, and Islam is seen as a major threat to Christianity. In Said's words, Islam in the west is always presented as "a lasting trauma" (p. 59). After the attacks of September 11, the popular media in the United States mercilessly damaged the Muslim identity. Muslims were regularly portrayed as anti-American terrorists, and their social and cultural practices became highly questionable. Television shows and newspapers showed passengers leaving an airplane or customers evacuating a mall because a Muslim was praying or had a long beard. In the 2008 presidential elections, Barack Obama had to confront the rumors that he was a Muslim (coming from a Muslim father) to prove his Americanness and patriotism, even though millions of Muslims are citizens of the United States.

Similarly, previous research about Arab students in the west depicts them as homogenous and identical. Writing in response to the dominant western cultures, scholars seem to emphasize racial discrimination, Islamophobia, and cultural exclusions, ignoring any discussion of minorities' complex cultural backgrounds, ethnical differences, linguistic variations, class, gender, family, and religion. Wray-Lake et al (2008) describe how the depiction of Arabs and Muslims as enemies to the United States in the American media has changed the lives of Arab Americans. Sarroub (2002) explains how Yemeni girls at Southeastern Michigan live in what she called "In-Between" the two worlds of school and home. And finally, Zine (2001) asserts how the Muslim youth in Canada negotiate their identities regarding their gender, race, and religion. In terms of Arabs' second language and literacy acquisition, past research tends to generalize their experience and learning preferences. Ried (1987) concludes that Arabs are strong visual learners. Meleis (1982) concludes that Arabs share what he calls the "social properties that represent a core of Arabism" (p. 3), not to mention Kaplan (1966) who classifies, or rather generalizes, "oriental" students' patterns of thoughts in writing as indirect and circular, in comparison to the straightforward style of thought of the native English writer. Contrarily, in this study, Arab ESL students reflected a wide spectrum of reactions to the dominant cultural model of school.

In the following pages, I present the experience of two groups: the first group is the older, more religiously conservative (mostly married) graduates, who expressed a strong adherence to their home literacy models and a vehement resistance to L2 learning culture; the other, the young, religiously moderate, single undergraduates, celebrated the dominance of L2 culture and accordingly re-shaped most of their perspectives about learning.

Methodology

I adopted the tools of critical ethnographic method, field notes and interviews, described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), and Spradley (1979). I also applied a wide methodological approach that relies on thick description (Geertz, 1973), based on thorough observation, formal interviews, and informal conversations. For data analysis, I adopted Gee's (1991) methods of discourse analysis, where I transcribed the participants' conversations and interviews. I divided them into idea units and stanzas, coding and analyzing major references and themes. I then analyzed the relationships, politics, identities, and connections as reflected in those lines. I also used critical discourse methods (Fairclough, 1999, 2004; Gee, 2004; Rogers, 2004), analyzing the participants' speeches, how they were said, and the larger conversations and ideologies they reflected. Triangulation of codes and themes was applied among interviews, field notes, and various artifacts. During the study, I was a participant observer, observing this community in three locations: the Mosque, the Arabian school, and the University of Arkansas Student Union. I selected these three locations because of the different literacy experiences they provided, the degree of comfort, and the number of gatherings I observed of the two groups. The first location was the Mosque, where both groups attended regularly. It was a comfort zone for both groups and, as it will be explained more fully later, had influenced both groups' perceptions about learning. The second location was the Arabian School, a comfort zone for the conservative graduates and a representative model of their home culture. The third location was the Student Union, where undergraduate expressed a great deal of comfort. It provided a counter-cultural model to the Arabian School and, from the graduates' perspective, a cultural threat to their home identities. I believe I had the advantage of belonging to all three locations. I am a regular attendee of the Mosque and have served in many administrative positions, namely the treasurer, the public relation representative, and the organizer of most the Mosque's celebrations. My children attended the Arabian school, and I attended most of its meetings and gatherings. My wife was also a very active member in the Arabian school's activities. I was also a regular visitor to the student union.

Both my wife and I are from Yemen, and we have lived in this community for five years. However, my methodical observation began two years ago, taking systematic notes after most major events at the mosque, the Arabian school, and the student union. I recorded most of the activities and meetings in the mosque, but I did not tape or take pictures of major religious activities because of the sensitive nature of these activities. However, I did tape most of the social gatherings and other literacy activities at the three locations. At the end of the observations, I conducted interviews and follow-up analyses of randomly selected four Arab ESL students (two graduates and two undergraduates who represent different lengths of stay in the United States, marital status, and experience) from United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Morocco. I interviewed each student twice, in a semi-structured interview format (open-ended questions and unlimited answers by the subjects). The first interview addressed background information: age, citizenship, family, first experience in the United States regarding language, and cultural shock; the second addressed questions about their experience as ESL students, their cultural perspectives about classroom structure and teacher-student relations, and their fears, hopes, and other concerns regarding learning. Some of the interviews questions took the shape of scenarios where students explained their preferences regarding the nature of learning, teachers and texts, or in the shape of follow-up comments on behaviors I noticed during my observations. During the interviews, the students also reported their preferences, expectations and experiences in the classroom. Both interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Finally, as a Lecturer in the English Department, I taught some of the undergraduates and observed them in the classroom, collecting several of their class assignments. I also collected writing samples from the papers and dissertations I commented on for the graduate students, their scholarship booklets, photos and videotapes of some of their parties and other outdoor activities. I collected data in different ways and forms for triangulation purposes, and also to serve a longer project that I am still working on. However, in the case of this paper, I mainly focus on the observation of the three above mentioned locations for most of the analysis, and few interview answers to explain some of these behaviors.

Description of the Community

The community considered in this study included 73 ESL male students (female students were not included, a gender issue that is covered later in the paper). These students were sponsored by different scholarship programs, in different disciplines and programs. Many of these students completed an intensive language program at the Spring International Language Center housed on the University of Arkansas campus, or in other similar institutes in the country; some took the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as a partial requirement for the university admission, or had the test waived after finishing the sixth level of the intensive language program at Spring International (by agreement between Spring International and the University). Thirty two of these students were from Saudi Arabia, 20 from Jordan, 5 from Qatar, 4 from United Arab Emirates, 3 from Syria, 4 from Egypt, 2 from Libya, 1 from Kuwait, and 1 from Morocco. In this group, 27 students were graduate students (ages 26-35 years), and 46 were undergraduates (ages 17-24). Twenty of the graduates were married and had their families with them in Fayetteville, and their children attended Fayetteville public schools. Married graduate students from the Gulf countries (Saudi, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar) lived in townhouses at the south-western part of Fayetteville, creating a small Arabic neighborhood. Many of their spouses attended the University of Arkansas, and their children went to the same schools or preschools, as they usually car-pooled their children's transportation. They were sponsored by their embassies, and their scholarships covered all their tuition fees, insurance, and annual tickets to visit their home countries and return to school. They also received various awards and promotions according to their academic performance and research achievements. Single undergraduates from the same countries received the same benefits, except for their annual allowances (married students received a 50% to 80% increase in their annual allowances based on the number of family members accompanying the student). Undergraduates lived in small apartments in different areas in Fayetteville but often gathered in one or two apartments during the weekends, playing games, watching movies, and having parties. Students from Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Morocco, graduates and undergraduates, were sponsored by different scholarships, for example, Fulbright, Ford and Clinton scholarships from the State Department, or the University of Arkansas (Assistantships and other financial aides). They lived in different areas in Fayetteville, mostly in small apartments. Most of them were married; their wives attended the University of Arkansas, and their children attended Fayetteville public schools as well.

The Environment of the Study

The Mosque

Located on campus, the Mosque is the only Islamic center in Northwest Arkansas, and the place where all Muslims in this area met, prayed, and held their religious and social celebrations. The major event in the Mosque was the five prayers of the day: Fajr, Dhuhr, Asr, Maghrib, and Isha. Very few members came to the first four prayers. However, a large number (especially the graduates) attended the Isha prayer. After every Isha prayer, there was a small social talk for ten to fifteen minutes. The other major event in the Mosque was Friday prayers, around 1.30 pm every Friday. Almost every member of the two groups attended this event. The sermon was given in both Arabic and English, but prayers were always in Arabic. The Mosque, a highly sex-segregated site, had two levels, one for men's prayers and gatherings, and the other for women's. Still, many small issues regarding "appropriate" dress, behaviors, and children's proper ages to follow gender rules remained a heated topic in the Mosque. Some of these differences came from the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of Muslims in this community (the community includes Muslims from the United States, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Iran, Morocco, Gulf countries, Syria, Lebanon, and many other countries). Arab students always congregated in small groups and had most of their conversations in Arabic; still, they frequently switched to English when they discussed university policies, exams, or other university business. Out of politeness, they switched to English whenever a non-Arab Muslim joined the conversation. The Mosque had no assigned Imam, the person responsible for all the religious activities and prayer-leading; therefore, some qualified students (those who memorized chapters of the holy Quran and have some knowledge of the Islamic jurisprudence) could alternate in leading the prayer and giving the Friday sermon. However, there was no collaboration during the sermon or the prayer; only one student was assigned the Imam-ship every Friday. The first group, the graduates, often did the Imam-ship/teaching. They were very eloquent in Arabic, memorized several chapters, if not all, of the Holy Quran, and also constituted a majority of all the administrative committees in the Mosque: the board of trustees, the executive committee, the legislative committee, and the jurisprudence committee. The Mosque carried out some other literacy events including Quran Recitation every Saturday night, reading from the Prophet Mohammed's Sayings (Haddiths) after every Isha prayer, and summer Arabic School for children and non-Arab Muslim adults. All these literacy events, except the Friday sermon and some English explanations of the Prophet's sayings, were in Arabic.

The bilingual sermon raised some uneasiness among Arab Muslim students, especially new comers, who, due to a lack of proficiency in English, felt isolated during such a major religious event. One Saudi graduate student told me, "Now I realized what it means to be an Indian Muslim in Saudi Arabia during a Friday prayer." The Mosque held most of the religious and social celebrations of Muslims in this area. There were mainly two big celebrations (Eids) that the Mosque conducted: first, Eid ul-Fitr, which comes after a whole month of fasting (Ramadhan), and the second, Eid al-Adha, the 10th day of Dul Hijjah (the twelfth month of the Muslim Calendar) which comes at the end of the annual Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca, where Muslims sacrifice some domestic animals commemorating the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son to the obedience of Allah (God). For both occasions, Muslims in the area gathered in the morning for a long sermon, the Eid prayers, and then a big breakfast. Then, they had some gatherings, games and a number of competitions at the Eid nights, where gifts and greetings were exchanged. The mosque also arranged for small parties when a new Muslim joined the community, especially those who converted from other religions, when a family received a new baby, or when students first came to campus or completed a degree. The community as a whole enjoyed a relatively peaceful religious atmosphere. All members of this group were Muslims (no Arab Jews or Christians), a majority of Sunnis and very few Shiites. Both Sunnis and Shiites in this community practiced their religious activities in the same Mosque, celebrated their religious and national holidays together at the Arabian School, and had intimate social relationships. Their religious solidarity was maintained partly as a reaction to the dominant evangelical protestant (mostly southern Baptist) culture of the University of Arkansas.

The Arabian School

The second major location of the study was the Arabian School, a small building located at the south-western part of Fayetteville, and funded through the Saudi Embassy. The school, which taught Arabic and held the community's meetings and social gatherings, consisted of two apartments; one was for boys' schooling and men's gatherings, and the other was for girls' schooling and women's meetings. It taught the Saudi Arabian elementary school curriculum, having the books shipped to the United States. Teachers used some chapters of the Holy Quran to teach the students reading and memorization, along with some basics of praying and worshiping. Some of the Saudi graduates were selected for the school administration work: a president, a vice-president, and a treasurer. The faculty included male Saudi graduates teaching the boys, and their spouses or other Saudi women teaching the girls, particularly the wives who were not taking classes at the University. Faculty and administration staffs were paid for their work by the Saudi Embassy. Students in each classroom did not exceed four or five (in many cases, a parent taught his or her own children). The school was used for prayers and social gatherings as well. Because of its location near their homes, graduates who lived in the same area performed most of the prayers at the school (except the Friday prayer where everyone came to the Mosque). They often gathered, inviting other Arab students to big dinners. These graduates had many meetings and parties, especially when a new student came, graduated, or left the United States. All schooling and socializing in this site was performed in Arabic.

Many literacy activities were held in the Arabian school, and all were done in Arabic. In addition to the regular schooling schedule that the school maintained (teaching the Saudi Arabian curriculum), Gulf students gathered to do their homework, discussed their readings, and planned their presentations and projects. There were also meetings to discuss school policies, to elect school staff and to revise enrolments, curriculum and grading. Many parents met to discuss their children's schooling (both in the Arabian and Fayetteville public schools), applications, problems, etc. Some met after prayers to discuss religious issues, to consult with each other regarding scholarships, projects, and everyday life. Others remained after prayers to recite the holy Quran. For example, to refresh their memories, Yazan and Khalifa, who memorized the whole Quran, recited and listened to each other after every Isha prayer. In this location, food was very important. In most gatherings and parties, they served all the traditional dishes, giving the members of this community a taste of home. Graduates, who have their families with them, prepared traditional food such as Hummus, tabuleh, fowl, different soups, kabsah, salads, and falafel. There were parties where they would bake a whole lamb or cook fifty pounds of rice and chicken. They bought their meat from nearby farms, where they bought live domestic animals and butchered them according to the Islamic Law (Halal meat), a major concern for the religiously conservative students.

The Student Union

The third major location was the University of Arkansas Student Union. Located at the center of campus activity, the student union provided services for students, staff and faculty, housing several restaurants, cafés, shops, book stores, gift shops, computer labs, salons, banks, a technology center, a post office, a mini-cinema, and a theater. There was a multi-cultural center, several rooms for students' activities, offices for different student organizations, and administration offices. The union had two huge lounges (usually used for cultural activities such as music performances, dances, and fashion shows), a big TV room, and a full-size hall for students to study and socialize. Many of the undergraduates gathered at the union during the day, sometimes at night, had some of their daily meals, and did their studies. They dressed the way they liked, usually in jeans and t-shirts, listened to popular western music, and "hung out" with girls; most of these activities were considered by the older, more religious, graduates as socially unacceptable, or even morally and religiously forbidden. In their conversations, especially with American friends, undergraduates were very informed about local cultural events, restaurants in town, movies and video games. They were very interested in events such as Thanksgiving, Christmas and Halloween (One student spent 100 dollars for a Halloween costume). Some of these undergraduates had nicknames: Mohammed became Moh; Isam, Sam, and Abdullah, Abdool. A Few even changed their names to James or George. Furthermore, the student union was an Arabic-learning environment, where American and international students met with Arabs and practiced their Arabic. The following is one observation of those sittings:

Moh (a nickname for Mohammed) entered the Student Union, wearing a white Polo shirt and a pair of black jeans; his eyes were looking for something. He saw Ali and Sameer sitting with two international girls. Moh joined the group. The group exchanges two minutes conversation; then, they went back to study. Sameer was working on his laptop, with his headphone on. Ali and one of the girls were reading books and taking notes. Moh took his notebook and started writing. The other girl went to the lab. Ten minutes later, the girl in the lab returned. Moh joined her, and they left for a smoke. (Field notes, 11/15/09) Literacy activities in the student union were very diverse. Many students gathered in groups and did their homework, presentations, and projects. Some believed that the student union was a good place to practice spoken English and to have conversations with native speakers. They made small groups and talked about school and other issues. Some students were assigned to watch a TV show or read a newspaper and write a summary or a critique about it. The student union TV room was the ideal place. Others stopped between classes, talked about projects, exams and teachers, or just had some snacks. Many students preferred to study in the union, closer to the union computer lab, where students had access to the internet, printing and copy machines. The union also had a technology center where students can borrow laptops, cameras, projectors, and other study related technology.

Analysis

The study follows the recent approaches to literacy and language which suggest that literacy acquisition is patterned by social relationships and cultural values and identities. Street (1995) describes literacy practices as the "behavior and the social and cultural conceptualizations that give meaning to the uses of reading and/or writing" (p. 2). Au (1998) defines learning as a process of social negotiations that involves many emotional and motivational factors. Millard (1997) argues that factors such as family, friends and peers can influence the person's attitudes towards reading. Finally, Nieto (1999) explains that "learning emerges from the social, cultural, and political spaces in which it takes place and through the interactions and relationships that occur among learners and teachers" (p. 3). She also adds that some cultural groups "do not conform to the way that schools define learning" (p. 67). This study shows that the literacy activities practiced in the Mosque, a shared location for the two groups, paralleled the students' responses to the role of teachers and the sacredness of texts in school. Literacy activities in the two other locations, the Arabian school and the student union, reshaped the two groups' perspectives about collaborative learning, study groups, classroom etiquette and college social life in general.

The Diversity of Arab ESL Students

Before any discussion of the students' perspectives about learning and social life in the new environment, I believe I should emphasize the diversity and heterogeneity of this ethnic group. In an article entitled "Arab ESL Students at American Universities and their Identity Formation Process," (Alamrani, 2014), I developed some detailed personality models that reflect the diversity of this group. In this section, I summarize some of those descriptions to help clarify the discussion in this paper. These models do not represent particular individuals, rather accumulative images and behaviors shared by several members in the community. I tried to avoid unique personal behaviors and listed only common ones, each shared by a reasonable number of individuals. I need to emphasize here that these models are not the only ones in the community; these are just broad examples of noticeable differences. I named the first group, the traditionalists, a religiously and culturally conservative group who have just arrived at the new environment, mostly married and enrolled in graduate programs. Majority of them live in townhouses at the south-western part of Fayetteville, actively present in the Arabian School and the Mosque. The traditionalist carries his home traditions with him, his dress, habits, and worldview. To this group, tradition represents the highest qualities, originality, and the purest forms of literature and philosophy. The new to them is always unauthentic, less genuine, strange, threatening, and a deviation. They are very ideological, having one worldview, one cultural model, and a very strict dichotomy between right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable, religious and irreligious. Most of them consider western culture as a threat to their home culture and fear any integration with it.

The second group is the westernizers², students who try to escape the limiting social, cultural, and religious traditions of their home cultures. Their journey to the west is one of pleasure, a dream come true. Most of these students are the single younger undergraduates, living in several apartments and university dorms. They gather dominantly in the university student union, the theater, gymnasium, and cafes. They have many parties and gatherings at their apartments during holidays, weekends, birthdays, and other occasions. The westernizer is ready to change; he is looking for change. Moh said, "The first thing I saw as I left the airport is a couple kissing each other, I loved it." This model is young, mostly single, looking for romantic and sexual adventures. He is very friendly, outgoing, bicultural, compromising, and has an enormous zest for life. He is very active in the social and cultural activities in the new environment, an avid participant in most of these activities, and a frequent attendant of the city's clubs, theatres, and restaurants. He celebrates Christmas, Thanksgiving, Halloween, anniversaries, birthdays, etc. Zizzo, for example, has two birthdays (one in every calendar, the Gregorian and the lunar Islamic calendars), Nabeel has a party every Friday night, and Moh's apartment is never empty; friends come to smoke Hookah every night. I also developed two more models called the ambivalent and the role-player, who represents mixtures of both extreme models discussed above, though their lifestyle is dominated by the choices or pressures they face in the new environment. Finally, this ethnic group is much more complex and diverse; there are conservatives among the liberals and vice versa; there are the secretive and the rogue; the believer and the faker. There are mixtures of two or more models, and some entirely different. Besides, these personality models are not fixed and static; they keep changing based on experiences, situations and the length of stay in the USA. Many traditionalists have loosened their values to adjust to the new environment, in the same way that some westernizers return to their home religious and cultural values after some cultural shock in the new environment! Moh stopped drinking after he had a fight in the bar where he "was almost killed!"

Collaborative Learning and Study Groups

Yazan: I took this class (seminar) where the teacher basically did nothing. All he did was assigning chapters and groups. Then every group gave a presentation on their assigned day, and the rest in the class talked and asked questions. Sometimes, the teacher commented, but most of the times he did nothing. Every time a student said something, I would look at the teacher if he would explain it or something, but most the times, he said nothing. Sometimes, two students would have an argument, and I would wait for the teacher to say who was right or not. Still, he did nothing. Sometimes, he would say both were correct!

² Westernizer, as a term, was originally used as a name for 19th century Russian intellectuals who believed that Russian development depends on importing some western ideas regarding liberal government and industrial economy.

When Arab ESL students, especially those trained in the traditional lecture classroom, attended their first classes at the University of Arkansas, they experienced a sudden change in the nature of learning, creating the first mismatch between their perception of learning and that of western academia. In many of their classes at the University of Arkansas, they were asked to participate in a collaborative teaching-learning environment, which had been established as a principle of modern education for quite some time. Freire (1985) defines the role of learning as "not to consume ideas, but to create and re-create them" (p. 4). Bruffee (1985) adds that students should be given the opportunity to "gain authority over their knowledge and gain independence in using it" (p. 49). The teacher becomes a "task setter", a classroom manager, and a synthesizer (Wiener, 1986), while most of the learning process is expected from the students themselves. Consequently, Arab ESL students' reactions ranged from a total disappointment in the educational system to some negative evaluations of both the classroom and the teacher. Many of them, as later confirmed in the interviews, agreed on "the strange" nature of the new classroom. They looked at the literacy activity in the Mosque, especially the Friday sermon, as the ideal learning environment where the teacher/Imam was always at the center, the source of information, and the controlling figure of the learning process. The rest of the students/worshippers should remain silent and "passive" recipients of his teaching: Freire (1970) names it, "banking education". Their understanding of learning was deeply embedded in the hierarchal power of the lecture format. Yazan, (a graduate student from UAE) in the interviews explained that he feels "more comfortable ... when the teacher gives a lecture about the topic, explain things, and we listen and take notes." Similarly, Sami (a graduate student from Egypt) emphasized his preference to the lecture format, saying that it helped him "to concentrate and focus." Other literacy events in the Mosque, such as Quran recitations, readings from the Prophet, or other social gatherings, were often shaped in a lecture format, where there was always emphasis on imitation, memorization and careful listening and understanding. They believed that a good student (like a good worshiper) should be a good listener, and a better grade/reward came always from understanding and memorizing what the teacher/Imam said.

Similarly, they have been taught in the Mosque that literacy is always combined with discipline, and discipline starts in conducting oneself according to rules and guidelines, first of which is respecting the teacher and the lecture. Any talk during the sermon would invalidate the person's prayer and distract other's focus. Any commenting on, or questioning of, the teacher's information might revoke the sacredness of learning. Codes of proper dress and behavior, including proper sitting, were stressed by both groups, though they were more emphasized among the graduates who thought that anything less than what they expected meant a "poor" teacher performance and a "poor" class. According to the graduates, eating or drinking in class could violate that sacredness. Interestingly, undergraduates, during their interviews, never mentioned eating, drinking, or operating electronic devices as disturbing factors in classroom. Furthermore, graduates and undergraduates articulated two different responses regarding study groups. First, the graduates, basing their judgments on what they witnessed and practiced in the Mosque and the Arabian School, emphasized that a "good" learning environment is a teacher-centered environment. According to Yazan, who served as an Imam in the Mosque for several months, the teacher's input was more trustworthy: "I personally don't trust the student's info... Group study is a waste of time." Sami explained his frustration as, I had this class where we had to make groups everyday and discuss poems or stories and write about them. I usually read the poem or the story at home, and underlined the theme, the speaker, the tone and the things that the teacher said. But when we made groups, people always talked about games, songs and movies... sometimes related to the work, and sometimes not. Every now and then, they changed the whole topic. Most of the time, I didn't understand anything they said... I used to ignore the group and work alone.

For most graduates, it was a question of power. With the teacher came, allegedly, the power of his knowledge, the authority of his sources, his background knowledge of the text, and the accuracy of his interpretations. They also associated classrooms with the sermon, where focus and concentration were vital. Learning required concentrating on what the teacher, or the Imam, said, taking notes, memorizing, and studying in groups did not include any of these pedagogical techniques. On the other hand, the undergraduates articulated a great sense of comfort in study groups. They did most of their homework in groups at the student union or the library, and they expressed immense interest in group projects and group presentations. Moh, a regular visitor of the student union, expressed his views about study groups as, I took a class with... (a teacher's name). It was really fun... Like; he started every class talking about events in town, games, most recent movies, or something. He would encourage everyone to say what he thinks. Students were very involved. When he taught, he asked us to do group works and presentations. He would play you tube songs, clips and movies and ask us to relate them to the work. Everybody in the class was active and talking; we became friends. Some undergraduates insisted that the teacher had a deeper understanding of the subject.

For example, Hussein, an undergraduate from Saudi, explained, "I always wait for the final concluding statement from the teacher". However, in general, they preferred working with other students. Hussein said, "It's always useful to see how other students think." They articulated more confidence in their communication skills, knowledge of the social and cultural events on campus, and they cherished the friendship that came from group studies.

Teachers and Texts

In the Mosque and the Arabian school, teachers were always equated with prophets, sheikhs, and holy figures. They were always expected to be powerful, formal, sacred and all-knowing people, a sacredness that frustrated and confused students if the teacher in the new environment violated it with a poor dress style, a strong sexual comment, or a degrading social or cultural statement. The first verse in the Holy Quran starts with a command to read, the prophet Mohammed is always referred to as the greatest teacher, and teachers and scholars always hold the highest ranks in the religious discourse. Many of these students expressed unconscious fear (or respect as they referred to it) for the teacher. Reflecting on their learning experiences at their home countries, Yazan said, "the teacher could fail the student without any further notice, and he is always right". Raheem mentioned that he was "kicked out of class" because he was "chewing gum". And Sami summarized it all in his comment, "in Egypt, the teacher is like a pharaoh; you don't want to mess with him". Similarly, both groups thought of the text as mysterious, powerful and sacred. When they read their religious texts, especially the Holy Quran, or the Prophet's sayings, they were obliged to seek interpretations from religiously educated scholars. Personal interpretations of these texts could be a risk. Moreover, the religious text was always right. Any questioning of the text meant questioning God. In the Friday sermon, the Imam tried to support every argument he made with a verse from the Holy Quran, or a similar act or sayings from the Prophet. Everyday behaviors and communications were built according to the instructions of these texts, primarily the Holy Quran. Eloquence was measured by how much the person memorized of the Holy verses, stories, and sayings, and intelligence was expressed in the accuracy of repeating them. The Holy Quran, as a book, should not be placed on the ground; it has to be set on a wooden stand or on a shelf. A Muslim could not touch the Holy Quran unless he was pure/clean (meaning removing filth from the body or the dress by washing it, and having a full shower after a sexual act).

Therefore, students, like worshipers, should approach the text with reverence, and the only valid interpretation of the text was the teacher's. In the religious discourse, God sent prophets with religious texts (Quran with Mohammed, Torah with Moses, Injil with Jesus), so they could teach the people the meanings of those texts. After the prophets, the religious scholars studied the teachings and actions of those prophets and could illustrate those religious texts mostly through examples from the prophets' lives and actions. In the Mosque, as it is in many other mosques, the Imam should read, and teach, the Quranic verses according to their pronunciation and syntactic rules, originally made during the prophet Mohammed and his followers. More educated Imams would have a legal certificate called *Ijazah*, meaning that the Imam has been authorized by higher authority to read and teach the Quran. These higher authorities can be traced back to the prophet Mohammed himself and to his first generation of followers. The sacredness of teachers and texts was very clearly manifested in the behaviors and assignments of both groups in classroom. Most of these students expected a very strong presence of the teacher in the classroom: Yazan summarized his opinion: A good classroom is the one in which the teacher has a full knowledge about the subject, understands the students' differences and try to work with every student... tries to see what is successful in class, and relates what is in class to the outside world. [Yazan also likes the] formal class where students respect the teacher and the class. Raheem emphasized that a good class had always to do with a good teacher who "should be a tough professor, no late, no noise, no distraction... [Raheem] blame[s] the professor for everything goes wrong in class." In their paper assignments, they would repeat the teacher's explanations, thinking that a good grade would come from repeating those words accurately, a problem they often faced in their evaluations in the new learning environment. Similarly, their critique assignments (reading a text and responding critically to it) were more or less summaries of the original texts, or a repetition of class discussion of the topic. However, in terms of personal relations with teachers, the graduates, who were deeply founded in the religious discourse, articulated more uneasiness. They expressed strong resistance to call teachers by their first names, comment or question the teacher's behaviors. Yazan explained that he always felt "awkward" when he called teachers by their first names. He said, "I always feel I need to apologize."

On the other hand, the undergraduates expressed more comfort and less formality in their relationship with teachers, calling this relation "very friendly". They had no problem calling teachers by their first names, exchanged jokes with them, or commented on their dress and behavior. Raheem explained this friendly relation further; Students in Spring International (language school) always speak favorably of Mr. ... who teaches grammar. They see him always in the fitting center. He plays soccer with them. They invite him to their parties. One day, as Ali (Raheem's brother) said, "He smoked hookah!" Ali also said that Mr. X is a very nice and funny teacher. He always reminds them of their grammatical mistakes even in the soccer field. And in class, he talks about sports, or games they had together, and jokes about some players. They like him. In general, Arab ESL felt "safer" in the new system, where they could choose their classes, times, and teachers, and they seemed to have almost as much power as their teachers. They also explained that their favorite teachers were those who expressed more involvement in the students' social life. In terms of gender, both groups expressed a sense of restlessness when dealing with female teachers. In the interviews, they emphasized a very formal relation with female teachers, resulting in some awkward situations. For example, a religious conservative graduate student refused to shake hands with a female teacher or "hug her" during his graduation party. Sami explained that, "it is a matter of ethics." Husein added that "our culture made it sensitive to deal with women." Yazan mentioned that when he first came to the University of Arkansas, he asked his department chairperson not to include any female faculty in his committee. According to him, "I still think men will be easier to understand me, and I always think of female teachers as more demanding." Equally sensitive was sexuality. As they confirmed in the interviews, non-hetero-sexual practices are taboo in most of their countries. Conversations at the Mosque and the Arabian School were extremely intolerant of these sexual activities. So, many of these students were surprised, even threatened, at the freedom the new system allowed non-heterosexuals in the new environment. Sami explained that he once had a gay teacher who was one of the best teachers but "could not take the gay image of [his] mind." Husein explained his first meeting with a gay person: I tried to be nice, but I failed; apparently I sounded super-nice to the degree that he felt something is wrong. As he expressed his homosexual identity, I said something like, 'wow! That's great; that's really fine, I like that' This sense of uneasiness was still dominating their ways of communication and their views of the new environment.

Pedagogical Implications

Arab ESL students are generally very active and hardworking students. Their respect and appreciation for class meetings, the teacher, and the text make them very careful and attentive to teachers' lectures and class discussions. The emphasis they put on learning, and the way they equate learning with worshipping, prioritize the importance of learning and school from other life activities during their stay in the United States. They come to school with some already well-established learning skills and strategies which can be utilized in the new learning environment. For example, they are very careful listeners, active participants, and eloquent speakers. They can do well in skills that require understanding and memorization, presentations, and class projects. They are very careful in following school rules and regulations, very obedient in terms of syllabi and assignments' dates and descriptions, and above all aware of the importance, even sacredness, of the educational institutions and activities in general. However, there are other areas they need to develop, beginning with some training in collaboration and study groups. I believe teachers of Arab ESL students, and in this case of native students as well, should demystify the value of collaborative learning and study groups early in the learning process, perhaps by assigning one or two articles about the significance of collaborative learning. Similarly, I believe more teacher-student conferences and class workshops would enhance their critical thinking and test their logic, which mostly comes from some cultural or social dogmas that can be easily challenged. In my composition classes, I bring some samples of different readings of the same text (some are students' readings from different classes) and challenge these ESL students to respond to them, developing their skills in critical thinking. In addition, Arab ESL students need to understand the difference between their home community discourse and that of western academia. A very good approach towards such understanding can begin with a discussion of the matches and mismatches between these discourses. For example, texts are sacred in the religious discourse; however, in academia, every text is open for interpretations and questioning. Finally, in academia, we tend to believe that it is always useful to challenge college student' worldviews, especially those coming from one worldview backgrounds. However, teachers should be extra careful with students coming from different background and beliefs. Many Arab ESL students expressed high resistance and fear to discuss topics that relate to their religion or personal matters. In an environment where their religious and cultural identities are already targeted, questioned and misunderstood, they can easily lose their interest in the class, and/or the teacher, by a funny joke, a sexual comment or a stereotypical suggestion.

Conclusion

Like many other similar studies of minorities in the United States, this paper attempts to generate more culturally informed teachers who would better perform in classrooms of culturally diverse population. The study also aims at clearing some misunderstanding about Arab ESL students, their differing cultural experience and their varied perspectives about learning. As mentioned above, this population includes many subdivisions of more or less powerful, more or less educated, upper and lower classes, religiously conservatives and liberals, etc. There is the more religiously conservative, monolingual, married, high class student, and there is the very liberal, bilingual, single middle class other. There are many others in between, and some completely different. So, for a more productive teaching-learning environment, teachers of such groups have to understand these backgrounds, build on them in terms of teaching strategies, and avoid any clash between the dominant culture and the student's background. Smith (1998) observed that such studies can help teachers be "respectfully sensitive to the cultures of their students" (p. 20). Gay (1994) confirmed that "learning is more effective when new ideas are related to prior knowledge and initially are taught in ways familiar to students" (p. 5). This study is entirely based on the observations of the Arab (Muslim) students at the University of Arkansas and may not apply to other Arab student populations in the United States. Still, the study can be useful in understanding the common background of this ethnic group, and for other future research. It is also obvious that this study does not cover female students, mainly because of the highly sex-segregated nature of this group. I could not have any access to observe or interview some of the female students in this community. I believe a female student can have a much better position to investigate the female students' perspectives about learning.

References

- Abt-Perkins, D., & Rosen, L. (2000). Preparing English teachers to teach diverse student populations: Beliefs, challenges, proposals for change. *English Education*, 32 (4), 251-266.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. (1992). *In theory: classes, nations, literatures*. New York: Verso.
- Alamrani, Gamil. "Arab ESL Students at American Universities and their Identity Formation Process." *Going Global: Transnational Perspectives on Globalization, Language, and Education*. Ed. Leslie Seawright. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars. 2014. 68-93.
- Au, K. (1993). *Literacy instruction in multicultural settings*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J.G. Richardson .Ed. *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-248). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Bruffee, Kenneth A. (1985). *A Short Course in Writing*. 3rd ed. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Collins, James. (2003). *Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power, and Identity*. New York: Cambridge U P.
- Cushman, Ellen, et al. eds. (2001). *Literacy A Critical Sourcebook*. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's.
- Delpit, Lisa, & Joanne K. Dowdy (Eds.). (2002). *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*. New York: New Press.
- Emerson, R.M., Fretz, R.I., & Shaw, L .L.(1995). *Writing ethnographic field notes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fairclough, Norman. (1989). *Language and Power*. London: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (1999). Linguistic and intertextual analysis within discourse analysis. In A. Jaworski & N. Coupland (Eds.), *The discourse reader*. (pp. 183–211). London: Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press.
- . (1985). *The politics of education: Culture, power, and liberation*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Fowler, Sherri B, and Victor Villanueva. eds. (2002). Included in *English Studies: Learning That Favor Racial and Ethnic Diversity*. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.
- Gay, G. (1994). *A synthesis of scholarship in multicultural education (Urban Monograph Series)*. Oak Brook, IL: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. Retrieved from <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/leadrshp/le0gay.htm>

- Gee, J. (1991). A linguistic approach to narrative. *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 1(1), 15–39.
- (2004). Discourse analysis: What makes it critical? In R. Rogers (Ed.), *An introduction to critical discourse analysis in education*. (pp. 19–50). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Falmer Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hammersley, M., & A Tkinson, P. (1995). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. London: Routledge.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. (1980). The Functions and Uses of Literacy. *Journal of Communication*. 30.1, 123-33.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm and Sir, J B Baillie. (1931). *Phenomenology of the Mind*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Kaplan, R. B. (2001). Cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education. In Tony Silva & Paul Matsuda (eds.) *Landmark Essays on ESL Writing*. (1-20) New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Meleis, Afaf I. (1982). Arab Students in Western Universities: Social Properties and Dilemmas. *The Journal of Higher Education*.53, 4 (Jul. - Aug., 1982), pp. 439-447
- Nieto, S. (1999). *The light in their eyes: Creating multicultural learning communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Reid, Joy M. (1987). The Learning Style Preferences of ESL Students. *TESOL QUARTERLY*. 21, 1.
- Rogers, R. (2004). An introduction to critical discourse analysis in education. In R. Rogers (Ed.), *An introduction to critical discourse analysis in education*. (pp. 1–18). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sarroub. Loukia K. (2002). In-Betweenness: Religion and Conflicting Visions of Literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37, (2), 130-148.
- Spradeley, J.P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Street, Brian V. (1993). *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*. London: Cambridge U P.
- (1995). *Social literacies: critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography, and education*. New York: Longman.
- (1984). *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. New York: Cambridge U P.
- Voorhies, Steve. (2011). University of Arkansas Enrollment Sets New Record, Approaches 20,000 Students. *Daily Headlines*. September 11. Retrieved from <http://dailyheadlines.uark.edu/15647.htm>
- Wells, G. (Ed.). (1981). *Learning through interaction: The study of language development* (Vol. 1). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Wiener, Harvey S. (1986). Collaborative Learning in the Classroom: A Guide to Evaluation. *College English*, 48. 52-61
- Wray-lake, Laura, Amy Syvertsen, & Constance Flanagan. (2008, April). Contested Citizenship and Social Exclusion: Adolescent Arab American Immigrants Views' on the Social Contract. *Applied Developmental Science*, 22, (2), 84-92.
- Zine, Jasmin. (2002) Muslim Youth in Canadian Schools: Education and the Politics of Religious Identity. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 32, (4), 399-423.