

## **Toward Living Together: Developing Intercultural Sensitivity Through Arabic Foreign Language Coursework**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper investigates intercultural sensitivity as an expected outcome of Arabic as a foreign language class in higher education. The study uses a pretest and posttest design to measure the change in 26 students' intercultural sensitivity after a semester of language study. The participants studied elementary level Arabic as a foreign language at an American university in the northeast United States. The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) was used to measure intercultural sensitivity. No significant difference was found in the students' levels of intercultural sensitivity as measured by the IDI, on average. The students' Arabic instructor was interviewed, and the elementary level Arabic textbook was critically reviewed to understand how students' intercultural sensitivity might be improved; a primary recommendation is given to provide foreign language instructors with further input on incorporating culture into foreign language curriculum.*

**Keywords:** Intercultural sensitivity; Arabic as a foreign language; Culture; Integrating culture in language classroom

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## INTRODUCTION

The influence foreign language education has on enhancing intercultural learning is highlighted by many scholars (Bennett, 1997; Bianco et al, 1999; Byram, 2008; Nussbaum, 1998). In fact, improving the ability to accept cultural differences and live with others who are different from ourselves is identified as one of the major purposes of higher education (Bok, 2009)-- a purpose foreign language education can, and should, play a significant role in achieving. The Delores Report, written for The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1996, suggests that there are four pillars of education: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. In his commentary on UNESCO's report, Byram (2008) indicates that living together is the most important pillar of the four "because it is the means of responding to the tensions of contemporary life, tensions between 'the global and the local,' 'the universal and the individual,' 'tradition and modernity'..." (pp. 109–110). Although all fields of education are required to work toward achieving the purpose of living together, foreign language education, in particular, is the most important field that should target this pillar. Foreign language education can help students reflect on their culture and critically think about the differences in realities, values, beliefs, and behaviors among different cultures. It has the ability to make learners realize that differences do exist and that there is more than one perspective of reality; to learn that their way of life is just one way of life, not *the* only way of the life. Byram (2008) argues that foreign language education can help learners to experience what he calls *tertiary socialization*, which means "the ways in which learning a foreign language can take learners beyond a focus on their own society, into experience of otherness, or other cultural beliefs, values and behaviours. That experience can and should give them a better purchase on their previous culturally determined assumptions" (Byram, 2008, p. 29).

Foreign language education should go beyond focusing on communicative skills and include cultural competence. The purpose of foreign language classes should not be just to train learners to communicate successfully with people from different cultures, but also to promote positive attitudes toward cultural differences (Byram, 2008). Indeed, "language education over time has ranged in its various endeavors from the teaching of grammar to the teaching of peace" (Bianco, et al., 1999, p. 13). However, this theoretical confirmation on the importance of using foreign language education to promote positive attitudes toward foreign cultures needs to be visited in real practice. Therefore, the concept of living together

and accepting cultural differences needs to be shaped in a construct that can be defined and measured. Among so many terms, this paper focuses on intercultural sensitivity as an expected outcome of foreign education. To be more specific, this study explores to what extent two sections of Arabic as a foreign language taught at an American university in the northeast United States helped students to improve their intercultural sensitivity.

The following section provides a brief overview of foreign language education in the United States, particularly at the higher education level, in order to provide a baseline understanding of the connection between foreign language education and intercultural learning.

## **FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

More than three decades ago, Senator Paul Simon (1980) wrote an article entitled “U.S Crisis in Foreign Language,” which was published in his book, *The Tongue-Tied American*. The titles alone reveal the basis of Senator Simon’s argument. His belief, in 1980, was that the U.S. was facing a crisis in terms of foreign language education. He asserted that the country was suffering from a decline in foreign language exposure in high schools and colleges. He wrote, however, that “cultural isolation is a luxury the United States can no longer afford” (p.33, 1980). Sadly, more than three decades after Simon made this argument, it seems that the crisis persists. According to a recent report by the Modern Language Association (Looney & Lusin, 2018), “the total number of language programs [at U.S. colleges and universities] reporting enrollments fell by 651 programs, or 5.3%, between 2013 and 2016” (p.1). The frustrating cuts to higher education language programs made Ben-Ghiat (2019) warn that the Monolingualism “disease” is “spreading throughout American higher education” (para.1). Ben-Ghiat argues that the decline mentioned in the MLA report is good news for those who support racism and xenophobia. She adds “fewer Americans learning foreign languages means more Americans deprived of the openness of mind and understanding of other cultures” (para.6). Because of program cuts and declining enrollment, those language programs that remain face an increasing responsibility to provide students with the intercultural learning they need. In the following sections, the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and foreign languages is discussed theoretically, followed by an exploration of how this relationship manifests in practice by specifically investigating intercultural sensitivity as an expected outcome of an Arabic foreign language course in higher education. This paper then considers how to improve the practice of building intercultural sensitivity through foreign language education in an effort to better meet the theoretical expectations of the field.

## INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Focusing only on the communicative skills in foreign language classes will not only waste the opportunity to improve peace, but also will lead to creating what Bennett (1997) calls *fluent fools*. Fluent fools “may develop negative opinions of the native speakers whose language they understand but whose basic beliefs and values continue to elude them” (p. 16). The danger of ignoring the cultural dimension lies in the fact that language classes could drive negative perceptions instead of promoting positive attitudes toward other cultures. In Bennett’s words, foreign language education can and should move learners from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism; these terms come from Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). DMIS is a continuum that extends from ethnocentrism, “the experience of one’s own culture as central to reality,” (Bennett, 2004, p. 62) to ethnorelativism, “the experience of one’s own beliefs and behaviors as just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities” (Bennett, 2004, p. 62). Each of these major stages has three different phases. Figure 1 illustrates the developmental phases of Bennett’s DMIS model. To avoid producing “fluent fools” in language classes, language educators need to make sure that their courses help learners not only to achieve linguistic progress, but also to achieve intercultural progress, moving from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism, which helps in achieving the “living together” pillar of education discussed above.

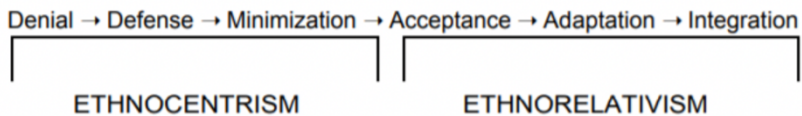


Figure 1. DMIS model. (Bennett, 2004, p. 63).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Language education plays, at least theoretically, a vital role in helping learners improve their intercultural sensitivity. However, to what extent language education actually fulfills this role in real classes is another question. This paper attempts to track the improvement of intercultural sensitivity among students who study Arabic as a foreign language over one semester. This paper tries to then answer the following questions:

1- What is the level of intercultural sensitivity of American students who study Arabic as a foreign language at the beginning of the semester? On average, does intercultural sensitivity improve over the course of one semester of language study?

2- a) How and to what extent do Arabic language teachers' pedagogy integrate aspects of the cultural communities (e.g., textbook, information about traditions, practices, and values) that use the language they teach?

b) Does asking for the teacher's own explanations of changes to their students' IDI scores provide information that explains IDI score differences across foreign language classrooms?

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

To answer the first question, a pretest and posttest design was used. The quantitative study utilized 26 undergraduate students studying elementary level Arabic at an American university for the first time. The student participants came from two course sections, but both sections had the same teacher and curriculum. To collect data, students were asked to complete the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), once at the beginning and again at the end of their semester of Arabic study (more details about the IDI in the following section). To answer the second question this study poses, the university's Arabic instructor was interviewed, and the Arabic course textbook was analyzed.

### **Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)**

The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) is an online 50-item questionnaire based on the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC), which was adapted from the DMIS discussed above. The validity of the IDI has been proven through extensive psychometric testing (Fantini, 2009; Hammer, 2011; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003; Wiley, 2016, and Wiley, 2017). In his review of all instruments that measure intercultural competence, Fantini (2009) describes the IDI as "a statistically reliable and valid measure of intercultural sensitivity, translated into 12 languages and applicable to people from various cultural backgrounds" (p. 471). Additionally, the IDI is described as "a sound instrument, a satisfactory way of measuring intercultural sensitivity as defined by Bennett" (Paige et al., 2003, p. 485).

## IDI Coding

On the IDI, ethnocentric stages include denial, defense, reversal, and minimization. Ethnorelative stages include acceptance and adaptation. According to the IDI, each phase of the intercultural development model begins and ends with a certain score. The following table, Table 1, illustrates where each score belongs on the IDI and the DMIS.

Table 1

*IDI Subcategories Scores*

	Ethnocentric Stage			Ethnorelative Stage		
DMIS	Denial	Defense	Minimization	Acceptance	Adaptation	Integration
IDI	Denial	Polarization (Defense/ Reversal)	Minimization	Acceptance	Adaptation	Not Measured
Score	55 to	70 to 84.99	85 to 114.99	115 to	130 to 145	
Range	69.99			129.99		

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Data

**Pretest IDI.** Students took the first IDI survey in the second week of fall semester 2017. Students were asked to log in to the IDI website and complete the survey in their Arabic class in order to get the highest possible response rate. As Figure 2 shows, according to the IDI, all of the students were in the ethnocentric stage, with an average score of 85.81 (polarization phase). However, not all students were in the same phase, as three students were in the denial phase. IDI defines denial as “an orientation that likely recognizes more observable cultural differences (e.g., food) but, may not notice deeper cultural differences (e.g., conflict resolution styles), and may avoid or withdraw from cultural differences” (Hammer, 2011, p. 475). 13 students were in the polarization phase, which is “a judgmental orientation that views cultural differences in terms of “us” and “them” (Hammer, 2011, p. 475). Ten students were in the minimization phase, which is “an orientation that highlights cultural commonality and universal values and principles that may also mask deeper recognition and appreciation of cultural differences” (Hammer, 2011, p. 475). To summarize, the IDI was

administrated to 26 students. According to the IDI, all of the students were in the ethnocentric stage divided on the three phases; thee were in the denial phase, 13 in the polarization phase, and 10 in the minimization phase.

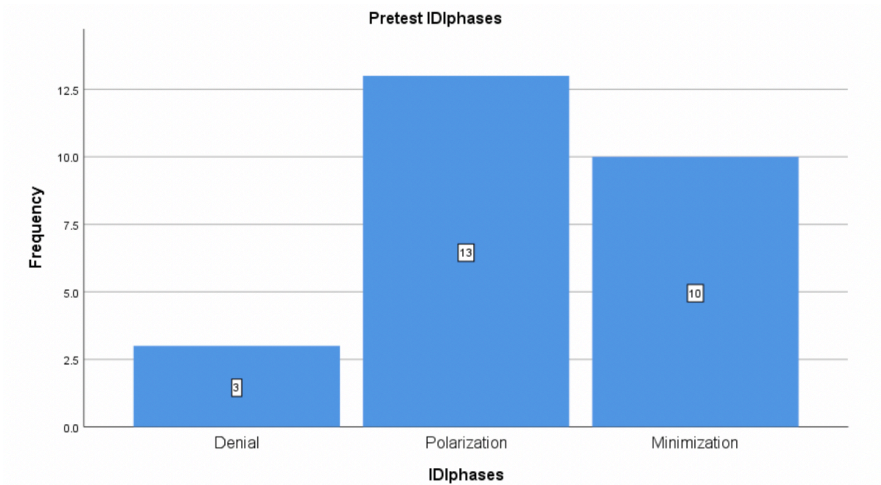


Figure 2. IDI pretest results.

**Posttest IDI.** The IDI was administrated again at the end of the fall semester 2017. As Figure 3 shows, all of the students were still in the ethnocentric stage, with an average score of 86.12 (polarization phase). However, there was a slight difference in the way students distributed on the three phases of the ethnocentric stage during the posttest. Four students were in the denial phase, eight students were in the polarization phase, and fourteen students were in the minimization phase.

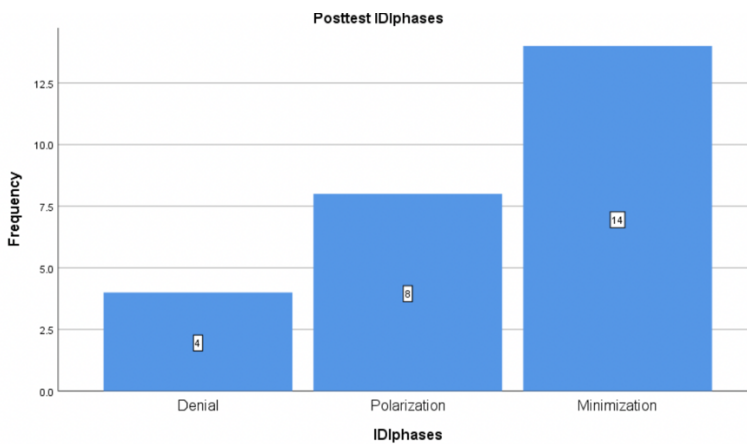


Figure 3. IDI posttest results.

**Pretest vs Posttest.** The mean pretest score for intercultural sensitivity as measured by the IDI was 85.81, while the mean posttest score was 86.12. These data were subjected to the *t test* for paired samples, with the results showing no statistically significant change ( $t = 0.18$ ;  $n = 27$ ;  $p = .085$ ). The effect size was 0.02, which means that the posttest scores were not better than the pretest scores, which indicates that there was no effect size. In other words, there was no significant improvement in students' levels of intercultural sensitivity after one semester of studying Arabic as a foreign language (see Figure 4). To develop a better understanding of factors possibly related to this result, a qualitative method was used to address and answer the second question of this study.

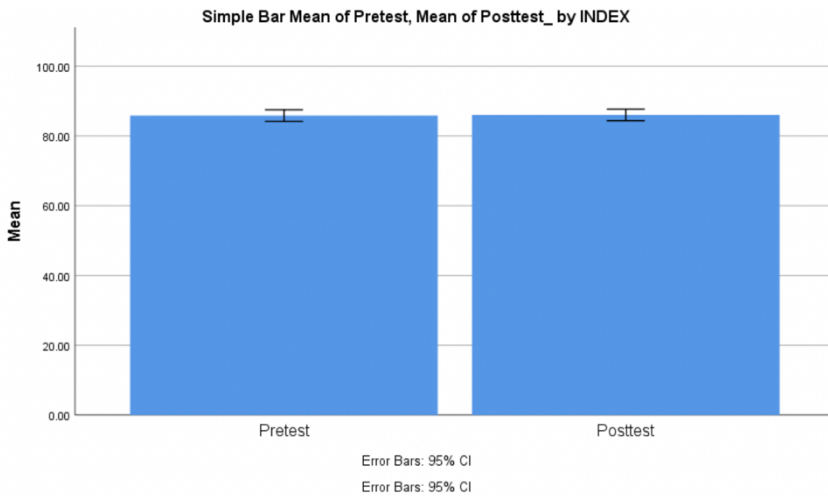


Figure 4. IDI Pretest vs posttest.

## Qualitative Data

To answer the second question, the university's Arabic instructor was interviewed. Elementary level Arabic classes met four days a week, 50 minutes every day. The instructor did not provide access to the syllabus or the course objectives for review during this study. However, the instructor did mention that *Alif-Baa: Introduction to Arabic Letters and Sounds* was used as the elementary course textbook. When asked about the skills this instructor focused on in class, the response was "reading, writing, oral comprehension, and speech." When specifically asked about teaching culture, the instructor indicated that they do teach culture, and then moved on to explain how important culture is. However, the instructor indicated



that the cultural portions of the classes are spontaneous and not planned. When asked about how often culture is taught, the instructor responded, “it is really hard to say because there are times [when] the focus is on the culture-- it is probably a third of this one class unit. Sometimes a day goes by when there is a little bit of culture, sometimes a day goes by when there is a quite a bit of culture.”

When asked about their pedagogy of teaching culture, the instructor indicated that what they do is that they include bits of culture whenever relevant. The instructor said, “sometimes it is in relation to grammar, my own experience depending on whatever we are talking about.... we talk about [religion], we talk about women, we talk about different topics as long as it makes sense to them and is not out of the place.” When asked for more clarification, the instructor confirmed that they depend on “explaining” cultural topics to students; “I explain the topic and sometimes I give them my personal experience as an example of that.” In addition, the instructor believes that relying on the textbook is not enough for covering cultural topics. The instructor indicated that they go beyond the textbook and use external material to teach culture. When asked for an example of how far the instructor goes beyond the textbook, they explained, “again, if I am teaching them vocabulary, and if it is applicable, like if I am teaching them the word for ‘tea,’ I take the advantage of that and start talking about what tea means in this culture.” The reported method of teaching culture was verbal explanation of topics that come up spontaneously in the class.

When I shared and explained the IDI reports to the instructor, they seemed perturbed upon review of the students’ scores. When presented with the data, the instructor responded by saying “the only explanation I would say is that you don’t change people’s minds overnight....” The instructor went on to explain that any notable progress would only become evident likely after two or more years of Arabic language study. The instructor also indicated that, despite educators’ best efforts, no change or impact in levels of intercultural sensitivity may be achievable for some students even after additional language study.

In conclusion, the verbal explanation of cultural topics that developed spontaneously in class was the dominant mechanism for teaching culture in the elementary level Arabic courses subject to this study. It is worth considering whether or not one semester of foreign language study is enough to achieve progress toward increasing students’ intercultural sensitivity-- and if not, how many semesters of study are required for students’ IDI scores to reflect an increase.

## DISCUSSION

As the results show, significant progress was not made in students' levels of intercultural sensitivity as measured by the IDI over the course of one semester studying Arabic as a foreign language. At the beginning of the semester, students were in the ethnocentric stage, where "the experience of one's own culture as central to reality;" (Bennett, 2004, p. 62) they were found in the same stage at the end of the semester. This means that spending one semester studying Arabic might have failed to meaningfully help students realize that their culture and the way they live their lives is "just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities" (Bennett, 2004, p. 62), i.e. ethnorelativism. This result indicates an urgent need to revisit, re-asses, and re-design the way culture is taught in foreign language classes.

Bennett (1993) stresses the importance of reflection, critical analysis, and comparison. He asserts that putting students in an intercultural experience that does not include reflection, critical analysis, and comparison will not help improve intercultural competence. Students in Arabic courses, or any other foreign language class, must be encouraged to reflect, compare, and critically analyze the cultural differences they interact with. The Arabic instructor interviewed for this study recognized the importance of the cultural component of Arabic coursework; however, the way they taught culture was limited to verbal explanation of certain cultural points whenever they spontaneously came up in class. Verbal presenting of foreign culture is not enough to create positive attitudes toward those who are different from oneself. As a few studies indicated, many language teachers lack the important skill of integrating culture in their courses (Golub, 2014; Meyer, 2007). Hence, limiting teaching culture to verbal presentation may indicate that the language instructors do not have the skills they need to teach culture efficiently.

Besides, the Arabic instructor in this study heavily depended on the course textbook, *Alif-Baa*, which is widely used for elementary level Arabic courses across American universities. The book consists of ten units that introduce students to Arabic letters, sounds, and a few cultural concepts. Each unit has one or more cultural aspect that is presented through explanations in English, photos, videos, etc. The book does not go beyond simply presenting cultural concepts and does not try to encourage students to critically engage with those cultural points. The authors may have preferred to leave this task to the instructors. However, if the instructors do not encourage critical engagement with cultural themes, this will lead to what Byram (2008) calls *weak internationalization*, as it does not go beyond "making the strange familiar" without using culture to cultivate positive attitudes toward the cultural differences. For example, the *Alif-Baa* textbook presents the word for "veil," *hijab*, combined with a picture of a woman

wearing one on page 50. The book asks students to spell the word out and practice writing it in Arabic. American students might have many questions, as well as stereotypes and prejudices, about women wearing hijab, making this an excellent teaching opportunity to encourage students to explore this cultural topic that is so central to Arab life and society, instead of only focusing on how to spell the word out. Without such critical engagement with the topic of women wearing hijab, an instructor may contribute to creating a group of “fluent fools” who “may develop negative opinions of the native speakers whose language they understand but whose basic beliefs and values continue to elude them” (Bennett, 1997, p. 16).

In his discussion of the cultural component of foreign languages textbooks, Byram (1993) sets up a few guidelines to help in textbook design and evaluation. He argues that “learners need to engage actively with alternative interpretations of the world” (p. 33). He goes on to explain that this active engagement can happen through reflections, comparisons, and critical thinking. Introducing an important Arab cultural aspect, like women wearing hijab, should not be limited to just a photo of a veiled woman; rather, it should be accompanied by a strong invitation for students to explore the topic, reflect on it, consider similar traditions in their own cultural history, and compare between the different cultures.

## CONCLUSION

The continued outbreak of hate crimes, intolerance, and racism indicates that humans have a serious problem regarding how to live together. Therefore, in UNESCO’s report, Delors puts “living together” as one of the pillars of education. Indeed, “if education is not intercultural, it is probably not education, but rather the inculcation of nationalist or religious fundamentalism” (Coulby, 2006, p. 246). Foreign language education can play a significant role in helping learners to accept cultural differences and, hence, learn how to “live together.” Foreign language education helps learners to realize that their way of living is not the only way, and it helps students to realize that other cultural groups have different ways of living, different values, different beliefs without judging or looking down at those differences. If foreign language education goes beyond focusing on grammar and communicative functions, students can learn not to judge cultural differences and accept them, which is a remarkable step toward one of the foremost pillars of education-- “living together.”

Arabic culture is one of the most underrepresented, misrepresented and misunderstood in the West. In theory, Arabic language classes play a vital role in bridging the gap between the West and the Arab world by fixing stereotypes and helping learners to challenge their prejudices. Hence, there is a premise that Arabic classes (and all foreign language classes for that

matter) should be able to help students to improve their intercultural sensitivity and move from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. However, this study tested this assumption by studying the levels of intercultural sensitivity of undergraduate students actively studying the Arabic language. Students' levels of intercultural sensitivity were measured by the IDI at the beginning and the end of their semester of elementary level Arabic education in fall 2017. In contrast to the implicit theoretical premise, students' levels of intercultural sensitivity did not, on average, improve over the semester. These unexpected results lead to a deeper study of the pedagogy of the elementary Arabic course. Although the instructor recognized the importance of culture, they did not know how to effectively integrate it in the class. Teaching culture in this course did not go beyond presenting information, either verbally by the instructor, or by the textbook's content, without encouraging students to critically and actively engage with those cultural topics. Obviously, this approach of simply presenting culture without encouraging students to reflect on the topics, comparing those aspects to their own culture, and critically thinking about cultural differences does not help learners progress from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism, nor does it help learners to accept and not judge cultural differences, which in turn fails to promote intercultural sensitivity. Verbal or written presentation of different cultures does no more than providing students with information; it does not tackle their formally formed stereotypes and prejudices. This study agrees with Meyer (2007) and Golub (2014) and highlights the need for language instructors to have quality in-service training programs that provide them with the knowledge and tools to integrate culture in their curriculum. If language instructors know how to effectively integrate culture in their classes, and if they can go beyond teaching communicative skills, these courses will help learners not only to communicate in the target language, but also to improve positive attitudes toward cultural differences, which will be a powerful step toward achieving the noble educational goal of learning to live together.

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