

Crafting Culturally Competent Speakers of Arabic: A Framework for Immersive Learning

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Abstract

Background: The current paper addresses a critical gap in Arabic language pedagogy, the tendency to focus on vocabulary and grammatical rules at the expense of cultural fluency. Based on solid evidence, it contends that when culture is not integrated into the language programs, learners struggle to achieve genuine communicative skills, which manifests in interactions that are technically correct but socially awkward or mismatched with cultural norms. **Aims:** This study presents a conceptual framework that lays the groundwork for systematically embedding culture into language instruction. Built upon foundational theories in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, specifically (Kramsch & Hymes, 1993), in conjunction with standards from ACTFL and CEFR, the paper posits that culture ought to be treated as a fifth essential skill. **Discussion:** The central proposition is that cultural competence is not a byproduct of language acquisition, but a prerequisite for true mastery. The proposed framework presented in this article is built on the principle of immersive, experiential learning. It identifies key strategies to improve immersion, including participation in the local community, structured cultural visits, host family programs, and the use of linguistic partners. **Implication:** The study concludes by emphasizing the need to transition from static, classroom-contained instruction to a more dynamic model that actively engages learners and immerses them in the living culture of Arabic-speaking communities. This new approach hopes to avoid producing “fluent fools” (Bennett, 1993). It has already demonstrated its ability to help cultivate a deeper intercultural understanding and establish a more effective and culturally adept base of Arabic speakers.

Keywords: cultural competence, cultural components, study abroad, language immersion, cultural activities.

Introduction

Culture, understood as the way of life of various peoples and their political, economic, social, and educational systems, occupies an important place in teaching and learning foreign languages and should be considered a fundamental component, in addition to the content of structured academic materials, in the classroom. Therefore, the cultural elements of the target language must be fully integrated and included in educational materials and curricula, as well as in all learning activities and strategies. Learning a language is both an intellectual act and a cultural exercise, in which intellectual mechanisms intertwine with cultural and social influences.

According to Kramsch (1993), the relationship between language and culture can be expressed in three forms: expression, embodiment, and symbolization. First, language expresses cultural reality; this means that people use language words to convey facts and ideas in a way that reflects their attitudes and feelings towards what they express. Second, language is an embodiment

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of cultural reality; it is the tool that enables individuals to give meaning to their experiences. Third, language transforms reality into symbols; for this reason, speakers often see their language as a symbol of their social identity. Whoever learns a language from infancy learns its culture, in one way or another, and therefore, culture must be included when teaching the language to non-native speakers. Due to its numerous benefits, the most significant of which are enhancing cultural awareness among learners and developing their communicative abilities, culture must be incorporated into language teaching.

According to Stern (1983), culture is taught in three distinct contexts. The first is a situation in which learners are distant and isolated from the second culture, and this is often the dominant context in teaching culture. In the second context, culture is taught to prepare learners to visit or work in a new environment. The primary difference between this context and the previous one is that the learner is more prepared and motivated to learn the foreign language. The third situation for teaching culture concerns immigrants and learners who are continuing their studies within the target linguistic community, and who are in dire need of guidance to integrate into the foreign environment, thereby avoiding various cultural misunderstandings. We will focus on this third context, which we will refer to as cultural space. When teaching in the cultural space has succeeded, we refer to the result as cultural competence.

Teaching culture will provide a key to understanding the implications of social and cultural meanings, while deepening learners' awareness of the impact of age, gender, social class, and geographical location variables on the ways people speak and interact. From this perspective, culture should be viewed as the fifth skill, complementing the four well-known linguistic skills that an Arabic language teacher, for example, seeks to impart to learners, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. This cultural skill enables the learner to adapt the target language to the contexts in which it is used and to understand the values of that language's culture.

Kramersch (1993) believed that only through the proximity of the first and second cultures can the learner make sense of the new culture by comparing it in an unbiased way to their first culture. Interaction with texts or native speakers will oblige learners to construct meanings based on the contexts themselves. However, any cultural knowledge previously acquired in the classroom will greatly facilitate their ability to interpret culture. This classroom-based preparation encourages them to seek out real-life situations that give them "chances to assume the responsibility of making sense of, understanding, and thinking about meaning with reference to both the source and the target culture,"⁶. In this way, a new space emerges, the cultural space. Teachers play an essential role in shaping and providing this space by striving to deepen learners' awareness of the characteristics of their original culture and the characteristics of the new culture, so that they have a degree of intellectual objectivity in analyzing intercultural phenomena. To this end, instructors as well as program, curriculum, and syllabus designers should consider, to the extent possible, the social and cultural backgrounds of learners when selecting educational materials and approaches suitable for specific teaching contexts. They should not ignore the values, expectations, and experiences that learners have expressed, or the learners will tend to feel disappointment or frustration, which would hamper language acquisition. Understanding the learners' cultural background will help instructors encourage comparison between the learners' original culture and the new culture.

Researchers specializing in linguistics have identified a set of techniques and strategies that teachers, centers, and institutions in the target language country can use to integrate culture as a component of foreign language teaching. There are many techniques and strategies that are particularly useful when teaching a foreign language to learners living in the target linguistic community, where resources are readily available in the learner's daily environment. We will discuss these strategies for teaching culture, how to activate them, and their level of importance, with specific examples of their role in achieving the goals of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. We will suggest strategies to make teachers aware of the importance of the cultural component in teaching language to non-native speakers, as well as the close connection between culture and language.

Discussion

Cultural Component and Cultural Competence: Conceptual Definitions

Learning the cultural component of a new language entails more than acquiring facts. It requires developing cultural awareness in the learner, recognizing how one's own culture relates to the new one by comparing the target language culture with the culture of the learner's mother tongue, and applying this awareness in communication. This process gradually leads to a higher level of communication capable of expressing cultural competence. It goes beyond merely knowing and understanding cultural patterns; it extends to constructing an individual viewpoint appropriate to the culture's visions and perspectives. It can lead to discussing cultural aspects, expressing personal characteristics, and analyzing cultural behaviors in a positive light, thereby demonstrating maturity in understanding the culture and discussing its forms and manifestations. This is what is called cultural competence.

The Concept of Culture and Its Importance

Language is considered the vessel of culture, and for this reason, language learning is strongly linked to cultural learning. Just as language encompasses all aspects of life, as expressed in the famous saying of Ibn Jinni, "every people express their purposes with it {language}," he continues the idea by saying that the culture, in turn, reflects, "all aspects of the life of a group of people; their social rules, behaviors, beliefs, values, customs, and traditions." Undoubtedly, the connotations and meanings of the concept of culture differ according to the fields, knowledge, and sciences that study and research it. Culture has been defined by sociologists and anthropologists, especially by Edward Tylor (1871), as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Clifford Geertz (1973) stated that the concept of culture can be used to refer to specific demographic characteristics, such as values, beliefs, behaviors, and tools, that a society maintains and transmits from one generation to the next.

In the same context, Madkour (2003) defined the meaning and purpose of culture by stating, "It is the total way of life of a group." The value of the cultural aspect lies in adding dimension to language teaching and expanding the learner's understanding of the culture associated with the target language. Each language has its unique culture, rich heritage, and extensive history. Therefore, the concept of culture includes a set of aspects of human life that members of society learn and participate in. From these definitions, we can identify the basic elements of culture: it is

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a way of life that distinguishes one society from another; it includes spiritual and material aspects; it is a human characteristic; and it encompasses all aspects of life related to a particular linguistic group. Thus, culture can be defined as all the moral and symbolic aspects in a society that distinguish it from other societies, including customs, traditions, morals, norms, beliefs, arts, and ways of life.

Cultural Competence

The concept of cultural competence refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and effectively utilize cultural information within a specific communicative context, whether speaking or listening. It is not merely knowledge of specific events and facts, but rather an understanding of the communicative context within its broader framework, encompassing its complexity of various linguistic, psychological, and cultural dimensions. Brocher (1988) defined it as the ability to perceive classification systems by which the affairs of the social group are managed. At the same time, Williams (2001) defined it as a dynamic, non-linear, and infinite process, based on the increasing knowledge and development of skills related to its characteristics. Williams, Martin, and Vaughn¹³ adopted this definition and identified the functions of cultural competence as: self-knowledge and awareness of one's own culture; awareness of one's perception of society's culture; acquiring experience in different cultural practices; and taking stances towards cultural differences. This is the best expression of this essential component when teaching a foreign language, such as Arabic, to non-native speakers, where the divergence between the learner's culture and that of the target language is usually very significant. Thus, curriculum designers must consider the cognitive foundations of applied linguistics to achieve four competencies: linguistic, communicative, social, and cultural. We will use Arabic language teaching to discuss the importance and interdependence of these four competencies.

These competencies are now combined into one concept, "Communicative Competence," established by the sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1972). A good example of implementing Hymes's concept can be found in the development of curricula for teaching Arabic language and culture, which aligns with the latest scientific trends. This approach encourages giving the cultural component sufficient attention at both the planning and implementation levels. This provides more opportunities for learning culture by diversifying social activities and practices that allow learning through hands-on experience and participation. Learning the cultural component in this way can remove many obstacles that stem from misunderstanding, especially in using oral expression, as many vocabulary and pragmatic rules have two expressive natures. The first is a formal nature that conveys an original meaning (such as geographical or historical terms), and the second is a social-cultural nature that gives them cultural meanings circulated in daily life (related to lifestyle, values, and identity).

Learning and teaching Arabic to non-native speakers does not depend solely on mastering the linguistic system, but rather on understanding the essence of a linguistic and cultural reality. Given these interconnections, it seems helpful to incorporate extracurricular activities into Arabic language programs to help learners grasp the cultural dimensions employed by native speakers and understand the cultural concepts embedded in daily communication among the people of this society.

The Cultural Component in Arabic Language Curricula for Non-Native Speakers.

The cultural component of the Arabic language involves recognizing the traditions, customs, and social values of Arab or Arabic-speaking societies, as well as respecting the cultural coexistence and customs of the Arab country in which the learner is studying. It provides learners with a deeper understanding of the language, helps them communicate more effectively with native speakers, and enables them to comprehend the diverse contexts of the language and use it correctly. Furthermore, the cultural component affects the learner's critical and analytical thinking skills. When learners encounter concepts, beliefs, and values in Arab culture, and these are also an integral facet of their classroom curriculum, their ability to think critically and understand different perspectives develops. This cultural competence, if mastered, enables the learner to reach the level of native Arabic speakers.

Culture occupies a prominent position among international standards and frameworks for linguistic proficiency. According to the guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), culture is included in the descriptions of each skill. For example, the ACTFL team defines speaking at the superior level as the ability to discuss a wide range of universal issues with abstract concepts in a culturally appropriate manner, producing extensive, well-organized discourse that incorporates cultural and historical references. We also find this included in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which states that at an advanced high level (C2), the learner appreciates the sociolinguistic and sociocultural dimensions of native speakers and can interact with them accordingly. These standards clearly refer to cultural aspects when describing learners' language levels.

In the same context, the cultural component is also present in bilingualism standards, as mastery of the second language's culture is a necessary condition for a learner to be described as bilingual. This is supported by what the researcher François Grosjean (2010) said: "Not all bilinguals are bicultural... However, many bilinguals, such as first-generation immigrants, are also bicultural, and this plays a role in their bilingualism." In other words, understanding the culture of the second language is a means to achieve bilingualism and attain a proficient level in the language.

Educational practices and experiences have confirmed that the cultural component in teaching and learning Arabic is of great importance. Given this importance, many scholars in applied linguistics have emphasized the necessity of learning language in its cultural and social context, a concept known as linguistic immersion. This modern principle is effective in teaching and learning languages; therefore, curriculum designers have recognized the necessity of giving culture a prominent role in planning, management, and evaluation. This principle suggests that language teaching should prioritize the communicative action and practical application of language in its social and cultural context to develop communicative skills and expand linguistic and cultural knowledge. The manifestations of this learning are reflected in the adoption of common cultural habits through extracurricular learning strategies, which we will discuss in the next section.

Strategies for Teaching the Cultural Component to Non-Native Speakers of Arabic

Figure 1 illustrates six key strategies for cultural immersion, which can be used to deeply engage with a new culture. Although all six are useful, each is independent and may require different levels of engagement. For example, the cultural contact provided when a learner lives in

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a host family is not identical to the experience of participating in clubs or cultural visits. Although the contact with a family is daily and may be intensive, the other strategies often provide different windows into the culture. Combining as many of these strategies as possible will foster genuine cultural understanding.

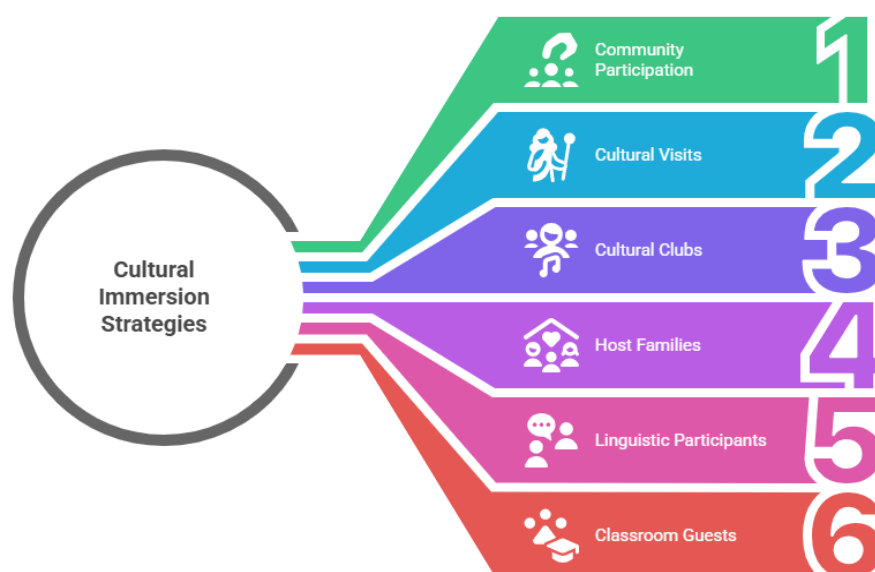


Figure 1. Strategies for Teaching the Cultural Component to Non-Native Speakers of Arabic

Each of the six cultural immersion strategies used to teach learners in the target language country is explained below in greater detail.

Community Participation

Community participation, or practical training, is among the most effective strategies for encouraging learners to immerse themselves linguistically and culturally in the environment of the learned language, as it provides them with the opportunity for real-world participation in practical activities. These activities enhance language learning among learners by providing an opportunity for direct exposure to the environment and community of the target language, thereby improving their critical thinking and ability to adapt to native speakers. Among the most prominent practical training methods that can be adopted in teaching Arabic are traditional crafts workshops with a cultural character, such as carpentry, sewing, or carpet-weaving workshops. Integrating learners into new cultural professional environments fully immerses them in the learning process. It provides opportunities for them to practice what they have learned, enabling them to acquire language and culture together through daily practice.

Cultural Visits

Cultural visits aim to bring international learners closer to a group of cultural landmarks, historical monuments, tourist sites, and popular markets. Organizing them periodically allows learners to learn firsthand about the customs and traditions of the host country and to explore its social and cultural activities. To achieve the desired goal of these visits, they must be organized

with clear objectives, such as preparing a list of vocabulary specific to the trip or a set of questions for learners to answer. Kolb (1984)¹⁸ through his theory of “experiential learning,” emphasized that experiences directly lead the learner to observations and ideas that they transform into abstract concepts that have a direct impact on their behavior. In this sense, the experiences given to learners in the context of their new linguistic and cultural environment generate new ideas that become part of their behavior and contribute to correcting false impressions and stereotypes.

Cultural Clubs

Cultural clubs directed by a member of the target language culture contribute to promoting cooperative work and encouraging language practice within a participatory environment. Among the most essential cultural clubs that can be created is the cooking club, as it enables learners to learn and prepare various types of food associated with a specific culture. The activities presented by the cooking club manager are engaging and authentic and have proven highly effective in acquiring an understanding of the importance of traditional cuisine. Learners encounter not only new vocabulary but also savor new tastes and learn when specific dishes are most likely to be served. In addition to the cooking club, other diverse clubs can be created, such as the Arabic calligraphy club, the music club, or the journalism club, allowing learners to focus on an area of personal interest while gaining exceptional cultural knowledge.

Host Families

Numerous scholarly studies have emphasized the importance of host families in language acquisition among learners living in the target language country. Among these is Dr. Sonia Shiri, who argued in 2015 that host families in Arabic immersion programs contributed significantly to intercultural socialization and cultural competence¹⁹. Through practical experiences, the positive role played by host families in imparting new language and culture to learners becomes clear. For example, if the host family includes the learner in a significant cultural event such as a wedding or celebrating an important holiday, the learner is able to draw conclusions about the culture and compare it with his or her original culture, as well as observe how people within the culture act and speak on these occasions. Language institutions throughout the Arab world have reported that host families significantly contribute to the development of learners’ linguistic and cultural levels. An example is the Moroccan experience of rapid acquisition of the spoken dialect, Moroccan Darija, through daily communication. However, successful learning experiences require host families who are willing to integrate learners into their daily lives and include them in their activities. Such activities needn’t be out of the ordinary and may include something as simple as taking the learner along when food shopping. This interaction is even more successful if some family members are young people of the same gender and approximately the same age. It is not sufficient to place learners in a home that simply provides shelter and meals without intentional interaction.

Linguistic Participants

The strategy of involving linguistic participants, sometimes referred to as language or academic partners, in teaching the cultural component is an extracurricular activity that significantly helps learners become culturally immersed. Linguistic participants play a fundamental role, serving as a source of cultural information for learners and expanding their linguistic and cultural knowledge. These native speakers, of the same age and academic background as the learners, provide them with explanations about cultural topics discussed in the

classroom. The task of linguistic participants is not limited to providing cultural information alone but also involves accompanying learners to cultural spaces or activities in the city to expose the learners to cultural landmarks and the connotations associated with them, and helping learners practice Arabic fluently on an informal and friendly basis.

Classroom Guests

A useful pedagogical practice in foreign language teaching is hosting a guest in the classroom. The guest supplements the established curriculum presented by the instructor, while providing the novelty of a new voice and face, and a different or additional perspective on the topic being studied. The guest may be a university professor or a professional in a specific field who can provide more cultural information about the target language community. The process of integrating the guest into the curriculum begins with agreeing that the visitor will speak on a relevant topic at a suitable level for the learners. The guest should also agree on the lecture format, which is not a lengthy presentation without interruption, but brief segments of no longer than 10 minutes before pausing for questions or comments. Once this has been established, the guest is requested to provide a head of time and outline of the subject as well as a vocabulary list with terms translated into English, and sometimes with each term used in a sentence that provides a clear context. It is important that the classroom instructor works with the learners to prepare them for the visit. The learners practice using the new vocabulary in their own sentences and formulating potential questions for the guest. Generally, this practice is most effective when the learners work together in small groups under the supervision of the instructor. On the day of the guest lecture, the visitor should speak briefly and clearly, then pause for interaction with the learners, who thus have the opportunity of first listening, then formulating questions or comments and thereby participating directly in the exchange. If the instructor senses that the speaker has presented the material too quickly, he or she should briefly summarize it more slowly when the guest speaker pauses for questions before the learners begin participating.

Conclusion

The present study summarizes the key aspects of incorporating a cultural component into Arabic language curricula for non-native speakers, both in the classroom and during extracurricular activities. The study emphasizes the importance of incorporating culture in language learning. It also discusses the fundamental importance of concomitance between language and culture, as expressed by the well-known adage, “Whoever learns a second language learns a second culture.” Clearly, incorporating the cultural component plays a crucial role in teaching foreign languages and is a fundamental pillar for teaching Arabic to non-native speakers.

Cultural competence is achieved through strategies for teaching culture that immerse learners in a mutually beneficial program based on classroom learning and a robust framework of extracurricular activities that reinforce the theoretical cultural learning with real-life experiences. To the extent possible, the curricula of centers, institutions, and institutes for teaching Arabic to non-native speakers in target language countries should implement the strategies outlined for the various extracurricular activities. Further studies on the effectiveness of specific activities and how to implement them in particular contexts would be useful to teachers working with non-native learners in any target language country.

Originality Statement

The author declares that this article is their own work and to the best of their knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for publication in any other published materials, except where due acknowledgment is made in the article. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom the author has worked, is explicitly acknowledged in the article.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that this article was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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