

The Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Learners of Arabic in the Sultanate of Oman

Fatma Yousuf Al-Busaidi¹

¹ College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman

Correspondence: Fatma Yousuf Al-Busaidi, College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman.

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the sociocultural factors influencing learners of Arabic as a foreign language in the Sultanate of Oman. A qualitative inquiry approach was adopted for the study, using in-depth interviewing, and students' diaries to understand how the sociocultural context impact non-Arab learners of Arabic in the Sultanate of Oman. Twenty-two non-native learners of Arabic participated to describe their experience of learning Arabic with special emphasis on the Omani culture and social milieu. The findings of the study showed that these learners experienced three main sociocultural factors which affected their learning of Arabic in Oman. Specifically, it was found that these factors were associated with the lack of encouragement given to learning Arabic in the Sultanate of Oman, the characteristics of the Arabic language programs in the country, and finally difficulties in adjusting to the cultural differences. These factors were further divided into different sub-categories and these were analysed and discussed in detail. Studying the sociocultural circumstances elucidate the development and proficiency of foreign language acquisition from a new perspective.

Keywords: Arabic, factors, Oman, socio-cultural

1. Introduction

There has been a growing interest among researchers within the field of foreign language learning in understanding how sociocultural factors might influence learners (e.g. Gal forSalia, 2018; Omar, 2017; Redkin & Bernikova, 2016). It is assumed that success in learning a second/foreign language can be attributed to particular sets of social factors while engaging in language learning (Jamous & Chik, 2012; Omar, 2017). Therefore, once the factors are identified, the major role of the teacher would be to provide a social environment tailored towards the acquisition of the language. The teacher should also be cognizant of these factors in organizing, planning the teaching programmes, and encouraging students to be part of the social activities where they learn the language (Gal forSalia, 2018).

However, in the field of teaching Arabic as a foreign language, very little attention is given to factors linked to the social and cultural aspects. Although the focus of educational research and practice has gradually shifted from the cognitive perspectives of language learning to incorporating sociocultural context of the target language (Aimin, 2013), this change has not yet significantly taken place in the field of teaching Arabic language. While there has been an enormous research into culture and social factors in language learning, what one can perceive from reviewing the literature is that the majority of these studies have been confined to other languages. This has limited the understanding of the effectiveness of these factors from Arabic language perspective (Dweik & AL-Shallakh, 2015). Although the field of teaching Arabic as a foreign language (TAFL) has received some attention, most of these attempts have focused on the acquisition of the language in general necessitating the need for careful investigation into what sociocultural aspects can bring into such a field. In other words, there is a dearth of research regarding how non-native learners of Arabic cope with social cultural factors in certain learning environments, Oman as an example.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Culture and Language

The culture of any particular context encompasses many aspects; i.e. people, places, history and traditions (Omar, 2017). Culture is described by Hamza (2018) as "the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Cultures are what make countries unique. Each

country has different cultural activities and cultural rituals” (p. 798). He added that culture is also about the values and beliefs of its local people. It embraces people's thinking about themselves and the world around them.

Culture is a social phenomenon operating within a unique communicative system (Redkin & Bernikova, 2016). The connection between culture and language is indissoluble as language is an important element of any culture and culture personalizes and contextualizes language (Gal forSalia, 2018; Redkin, & Bernikova, 2016). Daily interactions and communication uncover the fact that linguistic competence alone is not sufficient. It must be understood that any language reflects the cultural values of its society (Gal forSalia, 2018).

Many scholars, researchers and educators agree upon the intricate relationship between culture and language, whether as a first or a second/foreign language (e.g. Kahraman, 2016; Omar, 2017; Sena, Marius, & Jean-Marc, 2018). As a result, a substantial number of studies has pinpointed the importance of integrating cultural aspects into language programs (e.g. Sena, Marius, & Jean-Marc, 2018) because it is hard to teach language in isolation from its culture (Yang & Chen, 2016). Hamza (2018) explained the relationship between language and culture as “language without culture is unthinkable, so human culture without language. A particular language is a mirror of a particular culture” (p. 798). Al-Dajani (2019) described language as the “vessel of any culture” (p. 281) while Yang and Chen (2016) portrayed language as the “carrier of its culture” (p. 1130).

2.2 Culture and Language Learning

Culture plays a vital role in shaping and enhancing individuals' abilities when learning a foreign language (Sena, Marius, & Jean-Marc, 2018). Since culture and language are intimately intertwined, students should be exposed to the culture of the target language if they are to have a comprehensive grasp of that language. Meaning and interpretation of language occurs within a cultural context (Stockwell, 2018). To successfully acquire a foreign language, students need to be exposed to the target culture. Teachers should therefore provide culturally appropriate, stimulating materials which can aid students in accomplishing cultural competence.

The way that culture is introduced and integrated in language classrooms has witnessed a shift from the teacher-centred approach to the learner-centred one. In other words, approaches where teachers play a dominant role in transmitting cultural knowledge to their students have gradually been replaced by learner-centred approaches. Therefore, “students' active participation is encouraged to construct their understanding of the target culture, while at the same time to reflect on their own culture” (Stockwell, 2018, p. 15).

Learning a foreign language inevitably involves its culture. It is culture that encapsulates how an individual expresses him/herself in diverse situations such as expressing attitude, addressing people, making requests or agreeing/disagreeing. Incorporating cultural aspects in language teaching positively influences learners' attitudes and perceptions towards the context, people and cultures (Gal forSalia, 2018). Stockwell (2018) outlined three paramount factors to take into consideration when teaching culture in foreign language settings namely teachers' attitudes towards teaching culture, development of appropriate pedagogical materials and technologies and the creation of a self-organized learning environment for learners.

In an ESL or EFL classroom, “students should be taught English with the culture associated with it so that the students can acquire the target language with cultural background and correspond in real life situations” (Hamza, 2018, p. 806). This can apply to learning Arabic as a foreign language because experiencing the culture of its native people can substantially boost the language being acquired (Omar, 2017). Needless to say, learners of Arabic are essentially interested in understanding its embodied culture (Al-Dajani, 2019). Omar (2017) reported that direct interaction with Jordanian culture enriched and accelerated learners' Arabic language skills (2017). Thus, “the teachers should keep in mind the importance of culture and must have a prior knowledge of the cultural knowledge of the chapter or lesson he is going to teach the students” (Hamza, 2018, p. 806). Omar (2017) believes that exposing learners to the culture of the native people not only shapes their personal characteristics but also contributes to the development of their language learning. Put simply, language and culture are so inextricably interlaced so that one cannot operate independently from the other (Hamza, 2018).

2.3 Sociocultural Factors Influencing Language Learning

Language is a communication tool and there are various factors that come into play in language learning development. Second language learning is largely dependent upon the social and cultural context it takes place within. What hinders language development will definitely impede using it as a vehicle of human communication and socialization. In the case of Arabic language learning, Farouq (2017) listed several factors that determine the success of Arabic language learning among which are community influence, teacher-attitude influence and government support. Arabic native speakers, when encountered with foreigners, tend to use English as a means of communication due to the globalized nature of English (Dweik & AL-Shallakh, 2015). Teaching methods play a

pivotal role in either motivating or demotivating learners of any language, Arabic as an example. Even though a growing interest towards learning Arabic is sensed around the world, policy makers particularly in the Arab world poorly respond to this global interest for learning Arabic (Al-Batal, 2007).

2.4 Teaching Arabic in the Sultanate of Oman

Unarguably, English is a global language, and the dominant language of information, technology, business and economics. This might lead to the mistaken belief that Arabic is not an important language and that it is an unattractive choice as a second or a foreign language. The truth is that Arabic is the most widely spoken Semitic language worldwide (Al Alili & Hassan, 2017). Arabic is deeply rooted in the nations of northern Africa and the Middle East and it is tightly connected to Arabic oral and written history. It is, thus, recommended that Arabic literacy should be a major focus of planning and language policy in the Arab Gulf, particularly in light of the current decline of Arabic literacy (Carroll, Al Kahwaji, & Litz, 2017). Recently, there has been an unprecedented interest in learning Arabic from speakers of other languages and “[such] interest in Arabic renders a huge responsibility on the shoulders of Arabic language teachers and education centers in Arab countries and internationally” (Al-Dajani, 2019). Even though English is a global language for business, finance, politics and science, Arabic is gaining increased popularity. Redkin and Bernikova (2016) reported that nowadays “knowledge of Arabic is necessary for everyone engaged in Islamic studies, history of the Middle East and Mediterranean...[and] today Arabic is one of the official languages of the UN and one of the most commonly spoken in the world” (p. 197).

Consequently, the teaching of Arabic in Oman, has both political and economic importance for the country and for the non-Arabic speaking expatriates working and living in Oman. Moreover, there is a growing need for non-native speakers of Arabic who are working in Oman to learn the local language for communication purposes. Others are also interested in learning Standard Arabic for academic purposes. The reality is that most learners of Arabic wish to immerse themselves in real life situations that demand a particular level of communicative competence (Al-Busaidi, 2012). Therefore, Arabic language programs must accommodate for the learners' needs (Dajani & Omari, 2014). Some researchers, such as Redkin and Bernikova (2016), have called for closing the gap between what students are learning in class and what they expect to use with regard to their needs.

2.5 Characteristics of the Omani Society

The renaissance in the Sultanate of Oman began when his majesty Sultan Qaboos came to power in 1970. Since then, the government has focussed on developing the country economically and socially in all sectors. The country has witnessed a massive expansion in education, health care, welfare and the provision of social services for its citizens. Accordingly, formal education in Oman has expanded rapidly since the early 1970s and the first national university in the Sultanate was established in 1986. It is well-known that Oman has had to depend on expatriates to work in different sectors in order to meet the growing needs of both the public and private sectors. Although Omanization, the government policy to replace expatriates with trained Omani personnel, has been in operation since the late 1980s, the country still requires foreign qualified workers in a number of areas.

In Oman, foreign workers come mainly from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and from various European countries such as Sweden, Italy, Britain, Greece, and Germany. They work in different professions that either require high educational qualifications or only minimum professional skills. Forty-nine years after His Majesty the Sultan came to power, Oman still relies on expatriates in certain jobs. According to the National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI), Omani nationals constitute around 56.1% of the total population in Oman while expatriates represent the remaining 43.9% (NCSI, 2019). The number of expatriate workers and employees in Oman, based on statistical indicators published by NCSI (2019), was around two millions out of the total population in Oman, which was estimated to be over four millions in February 2019.

The diversity and complexity of the social and economic texture of this country explain the use of English as a convenient means of communication, especially in Muscat, the capital city of Oman. Although the official national language of Oman is Arabic, English is widely recognized as the country's second language used by a huge number of expatriates and Arabs alike. Despite the abundant reliance on English in Oman, there is a growing interest in the teaching and learning of Arabic, particularly among non-native speakers of Arabic (Al-Busaidi, 2012). Since Oman is a Muslim country, the Arabic language is necessary for the performance of Islamic activities and rituals such as prayers, reading the Holy Quran and performing pilgrimage. Interestingly, and very recently, there has been a growing demand for learning Arabic by non-Arabs and non-Muslims as well. This drive by expatriates to learn and speak Arabic is not unique to Oman, but the Sultanate has decided to act accordingly, particularly as the Arabic language learning can serve political, social and educational purposes. Several questions, however, have been raised in association with this increasing trend of learning Arabic. Most importantly, how prepared is the

educational system, whether led by government forces or private ones, to accommodate such a need to learn Arabic by non-native speakers? Another question, of equal significance, is whether, in such a diverse country as Oman, learning Arabic would be facilitated or hindered by the sociocultural texture of the country?

2.6 Adopting a Sociocultural Framework

In this study, a sociocultural framework is manifested to understand the role of the sociocultural context of the Sultanate of Oman and its impact on learning of Arabic by non-native speakers. Since this approach portrays the social and cultural context as a determinant in shaping linguistic experience, it will illustrate the complexity of learning Arabic by non-native speakers in the Omani society (Bryman, 2001). Sociocultural theory situates human thoughts and actions within a social and cultural context (Lantolf, 2000). Vygotsky, the father of sociocultural theory, believed in the role of the sociocultural background in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). Understanding learning, with this perspective in mind, explains learning not as a cognitive process but rather as a social phenomenon that is shaped by the culture within which it occurs. Based on the principles of the sociocultural approach, an individual's learning experience is reflected by the social milieu that is where and when the learning experience is taking place. It is believed that, within the framework of sociocultural theory that effective learning occurs when students interact with other peers in the classroom setting (Aimin, 2013). Thus, meaningful learning is defined as a social process constructed by the active engagement of the learners (Lantolf, 2000).

Language learning is largely influenced by its social and cultural context. Vygotskian theory describes learning as a result of social interaction and this is particularly applicable for language learning (Lantolf, 2000). Thus, the case of non-natives learning Arabic in the Sultanate of Oman is inevitably influenced by the Omani cultural context. This social interaction enhances language learning whether formally in the classroom or informally, when dealing with the locals. Considering the diversity of the research participants, coupled with the wide cultural and linguistic diversity in the Omani setting, the current study attempts to uncover the impact of the sociocultural aspects on learners of Arabic.

3. Purpose of the Study

Bearing in mind the importance of sociocultural factors in foreign language programmes and the neglect of this aspect in Arabic language research, this study was an exploratory study, aimed at understanding how the setting, where learners are learning Arabic, might influence their acquisition of the language. No research has been conducted in Oman to examine the effect of the Omani society and its culture on learning Arabic as a foreign language. Likewise, no consideration has been given to the non-native Arabic learners' voices by using qualitative methods to explore this issue. Therefore, educational scholars in the field of Arabic linguistics maintain the importance of filling the gap in this fundamental area (Al-Busaidi, 2012; Dajani & Omari 2014). Understanding the sociocultural factors which influence the acquisition of Arabic in Oman could help in the development and the provision of Arabic teaching programmes in Oman. Thus, this research study seeks to answer the following question:

What are the sociocultural factors that influence non-native learners of Arabic in Oman?

4. Methodology

A considerable number of previous studies have investigated learners' perceptions in the area of language barriers and attitudes. This particular study, however, focused on understanding the in-depth impact of sociocultural factors on non-native speakers who are learning Arabic in the social context of Oman. A qualitative-interpretive design is, therefore, followed to allow for reflective understanding.

Twenty-two learners of Arabic aged between 35 and 59 participated in this study. They came from nine different cultures: Turkey, Greece, Sweden, England, Italy, France, Pakistan, the Netherlands and India. They were working in Oman in different sectors such as medicine, engineering, computer services, petroleum and in some private companies, mostly working in prestigious positions. This study is based on two qualitative methods to understand the sociocultural factors influencing learners of Arabic in the Omani context. The learners described their experience of learning Arabic in Oman via semi-structured interviews, and by means of diaries. Using such qualitative tools is fundamental to gain a deeper understanding of the issue from the learner's point of view.

Semi-structured interviews are believed to yield in-depth data and allow participants to express and explain their views with sufficient details (Ritchie & Lewis 2003). Each interview took between 25 and 45 minutes. The participants were firstly asked about their personal background including names, first language, cultural backgrounds, duration of employment and life in Oman. They also provided information about their occupations, their experiences of language learning and lastly about their motives for learning Arabic. As in all semi-structured interviews, the main questions were scripted, but they were modified and elaborated to provoke further and deeper

thoughts (Silverman, 2016). All the interviews were conducted in English because the participants could speak fluent English either as a mother tongue or a second language. The interviews were audio taped, and finally, the researcher transcribed the interviews' verbatim.

Additionally, learners' diaries were employed to cross-reference and validate the data collected via the interviews (Mertens, 2014). Many researchers acknowledged diaries as valuable qualitative data collection tools as they provide insightful descriptions of the participants' daily lives (Mertens, 2014; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2012; Silverman, 2016). As writing is a linguistically demanding task, these participants were asked to write their diaries in English rather than in Arabic. They were instructed to keep writing their diary entries for a course of ten weeks, noting down any events or attempts to learn or use Arabic and including such details as their feelings and reflections about their learning experience. It was hoped that this diary writing would present insights about the impact of the sociocultural dimension of the Omani context in honing or hindering the participants' learning of Arabic.

5. Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis of the obtained data was done manually. Silverman's (2016) suggestion in coding and analysing the data was followed. Specifically, the collected data were carefully read several times, screening for any sociocultural aspects that affected the participants' learning of Arabic. After that, the relevant data were highlighted, summarized and recorded in a separate paper. Initially, independent lists of sociocultural aspects were created for each participant. For further understanding of each learner's sociocultural dimensions, the researcher ran a comparison between these lists to pinpoint the similarities and differences. Finally, the emerging themes were discussed and double-checked with two other colleagues.

6. Findings and Discussion

This section reports the findings and discussion regarding the sociocultural factors in learning Arabic in Oman. It emerged that the learners of Arabic in Oman experienced three main sociocultural factors. These included lack of encouragement given to learn Arabic, the characteristics of the Arabic language programmes in Oman, and finally the adjustments to cultural differences. Each factor is further divided into different sub-categories.

6.1 Lack of Encouragement Given to Learning Arabic

Lack of encouragement given to learning Arabic is a function of the scarcity of Arabic programmes for non-native speakers; knowledge of Arabic is not required by the employers in Oman, and finally, the position of English in Oman. The following sections will discuss these factors in detail.

6.1.1 The Scarcity of Arabic Programmes for Non-native Speakers

One of the emergent issues in learning Arabic that was reported by these participants was associated with the lack of the availability of Arabic language programmes.

For example, one of them reported in his diary:

"there is a great shortage of Arabic language programs offered to foreigners in Oman, especially those programs that suit different levels of learning" (Thomas, diary).

A similar idea was expressed by El-Omari and Bataineh (2018) when they listed the lack of centers for teaching Arabic to non-natives as one of the major challenges of learning Arabic.

Sara also reported that although she had been living in Oman for more than 7 years, she had just started learning Arabic:

I have been in Oman for 7 years but I just started the course few months ago...I have been searching for a school that offers Arabic for a long time. The biggest challenge was that there are few institutions that offer Arabic classes that I could choose from (Sara, Interview).

Listening to the voices of these participants showed that they were interested in learning Arabic and some of them had even gone a step further and looked for having a qualification in Arabic. For example, one participant, in this study, stated that her aim was to study Arabic up to university level and she was keen to get a degree in Arabic but she could not find an opportunity to do so in Oman:

It would be nice if the universities in Oman could offer classes for university level students. I have sent an email to a director in the Sultan Qaboos University to find out if they do such a thing but then they seem to not have any....(Hannah, Interview).

This was supported by another participant who had been searching for an institute for teaching Arabic for his friends, who were working in one popular Western university. He said "Western universities look for possibilities

for sending their students for intensive summer language programmes in Oman. However, there is no institution able to offer such academic programmes” (Aaron, Interview).

Sandra also confirmed this in her diary by saying

Oman seems to be one target for these universities that are willing to send their students to study Arabic abroad. My friend wrote to see if any institution will be able to arrange this kind of thing...when I search, they couldn't accept this because they don't have the experience and the teachers for this kind of programmes (Sandra, diary).

The majority of the participants in this study came from Western countries, where the policy makers place emphasis on the importance of the use of the local language by foreigners living and working in their countries. The participants stated that the encouragement given by higher authorities to learn the local language is not just limited to encouraging non-native speakers learn the language, it should extend to attracting many foreigners to go to their countries and learn their languages. This does not seem to be the case in Oman. This is exemplified by the following responses:

In my country we know the importance of the local language been appreciated locally by foreigners. We have done a lot to introduce them to the language...it is a directive from higher authority that local institutions should promote the language. What I have seen when I meet a lot of expatriates around is that they still do not learn Arabic. Some of them have been in Oman for so long time and I wonder why they don't learn Arabic (Lillian, Interview).

In the Netherlands learning Dutch for foreigners is one of the most important issues in the country discussed by society and the government as well. They have done a lot of things not only obliging people to learn Dutch but they also facilitate the process a lot by subsidising classes, training teachers, promoting educational materials, and supporting companies to encourage their employees to learn the language. I would like also Arabic language to be promoted in Oman more and more. I think it's a moral responsibility. It is morally ethical that all foreigners who come here should learn the local language (Linda, Interview).

These learners describe the status of teaching the local language for foreigners in some Western countries, such as the Netherlands and France, as a means towards protecting the native language. Therefore, disseminating their language is a primary goal for states, organizations, academies and individuals. When these learners came to live and work in the Omani society, they did not find the same attention given to Arabic language programs.

6.1.2 Knowledge of Arabic Is Not Required By Employers in Oman

One of these participants' challenges in learning the Arabic language in Oman is that knowledge of Arabic is not required by their employers and this has demotivated them. For example, one of them reported the idea that “non-native speakers in Oman are not required by their employers to learn Arabic nor are they required to achieve any level in proficiency to get a job, so we don't get any support to carry on”.

Clearly, this situation causes challenges for any non-native speakers who are interested in learning Arabic. For example, although some learners start learning the language enthusiastically, they often give up and lose their motivation to carry on. Sally summarized this issue and said

Many of my colleagues do not study Arabic and even those who started learning the language decided to withdraw. It is very easy for anyone to lose the motivation as you still can live and have a job without the need to learn Arabic... (Sally, Interview).

Neil also reported this issue in his diary:

It would not be possible to carry on. The next stage of a course would start at 4 pm. My company doesn't require me to learn the language; therefore, they will not allow me to leave early. I just wish I could find another institute that offers a course after 6 pm (Neil, diary).

Such stances can be linked to the peculiarity of the economic situation of Oman, where in many fields the country is largely dependent on foreign workers. Businesses and workplaces mainly rely on communication in English and thus there is no pressing need to use and speak Arabic. On the other hand, people who go to work in European countries, such as England or France have no choice but to learn the local language if they want to survive. Arabic learners in Oman are not under the same pressure as they are required to use English in their work sectors. However, although Arabic is not required by their Omani employers, some expatriates believe that they can not be successful in their work unless they learn the language. For example, one participant, who is working as a hospital surgeon, stated that he is studying Arabic because he believes that this will help him to have good communication with his patients:

Some of my patients, especially older ones, do not speak English. I feel that it is moral responsibility for me to

speak to them in the language that they can understand. "I feel very bad when I have to ask someone to translate what I would like to explain to them (Gander, Interview).

The assumption here is that even though English is the work language in some sectors, there are still some fields where knowledge of Arabic is fundamental. Bearing in mind that in Oman, nearly half of the workers in health services are not Arabs, there is no doubt that these people require some knowledge of the language in order to be able to deal with the priorities of the sick, to provide remedial and preventive services successfully, and to understand the needs and requirements of the patients. The absence of the linguistic knowledge in this specific field not only affects the quality of work, but might lead to critical consequences that could put the lives of many patients at risk, and perhaps in some cases lead to death.

6.1.3 The Position of English in Oman

These participants seemed to encounter challenges resulting from the position of English in the country. For example, one of them said "in Oman everyone speaks English. English is used everywhere. Even if I try to speak Arabic, the answer comes in English. This does not help me acquiring Arabic" (Sam, Interview). Another student mentioned this in her diary and said "in a society such as Oman, the non-native speakers are living in Muscat and able to access English everywhere so how can they achieve a good level in language proficiency?".

A possible explanation for this finding might be that the majority of these respondents are working in fields such as petroleum companies, financial institutions, engineering firms and information technology which only require English as a work language. Again, this is similar to other Arab Gulf States where non-Arabs can easily conduct their daily social and economic transactions without ever using Arabic.

6.2 The Characteristics of the Arabic Language Teaching Programs in Oman

This section presents the challenges reported by these participants related to the characteristics of the Arabic language teaching programs in Oman. This might be based on the differences between the academic system in their home countries or other countries, where they have been learning other foreign languages, and that of the Omani programme. The data indicated that these differences are associated with the role of the teacher, the nature of the learning resources and finally, the assessment system used in this programme.

6.2.1 The Role of the Teacher

Differences in teaching methodologies and the teacher's role presented a challenge to some participants. For example, one of them stated that the way her teacher used to teach did not help her to practise the language very often in the classroom. She wrote in her diary "I believe more time in class speaking the language and having to create my own learning is needed; however, the style of teaching is very formal with not enough interaction with the students" (Susan, Diary). Another participant explained this issue further in her interview:

The approach of teaching is instructive. I used to be a researcher and I have a very inquiring mind. I want to ask a lot of questions. I want to be able to acquire information that may not be relevant to that particular lesson and I find that a little frustrating in his class. I only hope things will get better (Ana, Interview).

The majority of the participants in this study came from a cultural background where interaction in class is highly valued. Therefore, they seem to be dissatisfied with the methodology used by their Arabic teachers. This finding is in line with Bin Samah's (2016) study which indicated that the main problems in teaching Arabic in Malaysia is the lack of effective pedagogical practices, as the Arabic teachers mainly rely on traditional teaching methods. Gal forSalia (2018) stressed a similar notion. In foreign language teaching programmes, teachers underestimate or are not aware of the profound role of culture in language learning, and thus they concentrate mainly on the linguistic aspects of language teaching and undervalue the cultural input. Some researchers such as Redkin and Bernikova (2016) pointed out that Arabic instruction and teaching methods differ from those implemented in American and European educational institutions. Similarly, El-Omari and Bataineh (2018) explained that one of the challenges of learning Arabic is that teachers display inadequate skills, and this is coupled with inappropriately selected textbooks.

However, the findings showed that the participants who come from an Asian background seemed to be satisfied with the teachers' style. This can be seen from the following response, "I like his way of repetition ... he used to repeat the phrases several times and we have to repeat after him..." (Mohammed, Interview). This could be due to the similarity between the teaching methodologies in Asian and Arabic contexts.

6.2.2 The Nature of Learning Resources

Some of the participants in this study also reported lack of learning resources that could facilitate their acquisition of the language. For example, one respondent said

In the classroom, I have to rely only on Ahmed, there are no other technological resources that could facilitate learning of Arabic on contrast to teaching English language. For example, there is a wide range of materials that facilitate language learning (Jana, Interview).

Another participant also mentioned

The institute does not have a language lab. The laboratory equipped with different sound where the learner is able to listen to the different sounds of the language and can do the repetition of the vocabulary and acoustics can help learning the language (Hana, Interview).

Ana expressed a similar notion, "I wish there were audio tapes I could listen to again and again that could be borrowed from the institute for a while and take it to my home and keep listening in my car (Ana, Interview).

From the above statements, it seems that the participants in this study viewed the absence of instructional materials that could support learning Arabic language as a factor that adversely affects learning Arabic in Oman. This can be understood if we consider the lack of designers and publishers who specialise in teaching Arabic as a foreign language. Consequently, this study is in line with that of Dweik and AL-Shallakh (2015) who found that instructional materials used in teaching Arabic were not helpful in developing the learners' communicative competences. Bin Samah et al. (2016) emphasized a similar notion and asserted that one of the main problems in teaching Arabic in Malaysia is the lack of effective pedagogical practices as the Arabic teachers mainly rely on traditional teaching methods.

6.2.3 The Assessment System

Data analysis showed that the majority of these participants believed that the assessment system in the institute, especially the placement test, is not accurate. Although they were at Level 3, they thought that there were variations in their language abilities. Therefore, this phenomenon might adversely affect some learners' motivation. Ana explains

Where I used to learn English, it was really very important to know the level of each student. I think it hasn't been done properly here... you know, these kinds of variations among the students do not motivate me to continue learning the language...(Ana, Interview).

Moreover, this phenomenon might cause disappointment and anxiety for some learners especially for those who are at the lowest level. "I always think what is wrong with me. If the other students in the class could learn the language, why should it be so difficult for me to reach that level?" (Robert, Diary).

Apparently, the way these learners have been grouped did not help their learning process. This could be due to issues related to the institution's policy. Given that this institution is run by a private company mainly for business reasons, the owner of the school might find it cost-effective to group the students in one class, despite their differences. Grouping those learners in several classes based on their abilities would require more qualified teachers which, in turn, would be more costly for the institution. This implies that there is a need for considering teaching Arabic for non-native speakers as part of a national plan that takes into account the learners' needs and their language proficiency levels.

6.3 Adjusting to Cultural Differences

This section presents the challenges reported by these participants related to adjusting to cultural differences. The data indicated that these differences are associated with the Omani values, and Omani customs and traditions.

6.3.1 Adjusting to the Omani Values

The participants also noted that Oman's cultural values are very different from their own values. One of the critical findings in Gal forSalia's (2018) study was that when different individuals from dissimilar language backgrounds meet, misunderstanding may arise due to their cultural differences. It is, therefore, more comfortable to interact with those who share similar cultural values. For instance, Sara reported

I just feel more comfortable communicating and integrating with people of the same culture. Sometime I feel like worried that I might harm the Omani culture in one way or another or I don't understand the values and the culture (Sara interview).

Hesitation in interacting with Omanis might be related to previous experiences of Arab culture and Islamic values. For example, one of them explains this by saying

There are unified Islamic values that bring all Muslims together which link them to Islam and culture. According to my knowledge, they usually merge with each other and have the rituals they practice together such as going to the mosque and praying together. They also try to keep all these values from any change that might be caused by

the expatriates (Ana, Interview).

It seems that this participant came to Oman with some preconceptions which, unfortunately, the Arabic programme did not help to change. Her statement tends to be correct in that most Arabs believe that protecting Islamic values is part of their Islamic practice. However, protecting Islamic values does not mean disrespecting others. Indeed, Arabs respect the values that require them as Muslims to live in an association, where everyone should support and help each other. These Islamic features do not mean, in any way, that forming a relationship with the foreigners is against Islamic values. It is well-known that, for centuries, Islamic history and the Arabic culture have interacted with other regions of the world. Even so, it appears likely that the beliefs held by some of these participants about Arabic and Islamic cultures have negatively affected their interest in interacting with Omanis. In addition, this statement seems to contradict with the statements given by other participants in this study, who stated that they found Omani individuals supportive and willing to help: *"I am very glad that I am here...it really amazed me the kindness, the helpfulness and the hospitality that I have seen from the Omani people. This helped me a lot to improve my Arabic conversation"* (Henry, Interview).

This might indicate that, although some learners might experience challenges resulting from the cultural differences, there are other learners who found the context supportive. In addition, some participants made successful use of the Omani society to improve their linguistic skills. These mixed findings might result from their personality differences and their personal experiences of the Arabic culture.

6.3.2 Adjusting to the Omani Customs and Traditions

These participants also reported that they were frustrated when building any relationships with Omanis because of the differences between the Omani customs and their own customs. One of them reported

I do not have enough knowledge of the Omani customs and traditions, and I do not know how to respond to them. Your habits are deep in your history. You have pure rituals on occasions. I do not know what to say or how to act. This makes me not to engage with my neighbours. I would like to congratulate them on Eid and I did not know what to say (Sam, Dairy).

Another participant also reported that he can speak Arabic but he does not know how to respond if the communication includes issues relating to customs and traditions. *"I think I am good at speaking, but my problem is that I don't know how to respond in the way that shows more respects to the traditions of the country"* (Henry, Interview).

What seems to be more frustrating for some of the participants is that they do not know how they should behave with the opposite gender. For example, three males reported that they know that Omani society has the custom of separating females from males. Accordingly, they decided not to make any contact with their female colleagues. Although one of them seems to have formed this understanding from what he has previously heard about Arabic culture, the other two formed a similar understanding from what they experienced in the Omani society. In order to improve his speaking, Robert used to start a conversation with any Omani he met. However, when he attempted to start a conversation with a young lady in a shopping centre, her responses frustrated him and discouraged him to do this again.

Looking for something to buy from Carrefour Center, I saw a young woman there, and I decided to have a chat with her. When I began to talk she was so distressed that she left immediately. This experience discouraged me from wanting to talk to any women in this country (Robert, Diary).

Another participant also reported in his diary

Westerners have difficulty understanding Arabic culture; for instance, separating males from females....I have been invited by a friend. I went there with my wife. It was a big surprise to me that my wife disappeared with my friend's wife to another room. I was told she was in a ladies' sitting room...! (Steven, Diary).

Some participants commented on the differences in the lifestyle between their mother culture and the Omani lifestyle as an influential factor in their practice of Arabic. Ana, for example reported

The difference in lifestyle between me and the Omanis makes me anxious to have a friendship with them. I know they spend their time in a different way. We love dancing, drinking and so on while the Omanis are very traditional and they tend to be conservative (Ana, Interview).

Although in the Omani society, contact between men and women is often controlled and limited, this is not a general rule for all families. For example, many Omani families, nowadays, participate in different sectors where there has to be interaction between male and female colleagues. However, this interaction is still controlled by some Islamic beliefs and cultural values. Therefore, misunderstanding of these cultural aspects might lead to

cultural frustration and disappointment for some non-native speakers.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study shed new light on the role of the sociocultural factors in learning Arabic in the Omani context. Three main factors seemed to affect the learning of Arabic in Oman. These factors include lack of encouragement given to learning Arabic, the characteristics of the Arabic language teaching programmes, and adjusting to cultural differences. The study participants indicated, as causes of lack of encouragement, that there is a scarcity of specialist institutions. They also declared that their employers discouraged them from studying Arabic along with the fact that people tend to use more English than Arabic in their communication with foreigners. What is more is the sociocultural shades of the nature of the Arabic language teaching programmes in Oman. For instance, teachers mainly rely on teaching the linguistic components of the language ignoring the role of culture in such situations. Moreover, there is a general consensus that there is a lack of supportive learning materials. Adjustment to the Omani customs and values, while trying to communicate with the local population, constitutes an additional obstacle to those who are learning Arabic. This can be understood when one considers the vast cultural gap between the Omani society and the learners' various cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers and curriculum designers both in Oman and other Arab countries be aware of the importance of incorporating the Arabic culture into the Arabic curriculum and that Arabic classes in Oman should be culture-oriented. Including Arabic culture in the Arabic programme could help learners of Arabic to easily understand the different views, values, and customs of the society. It is also suggested that the incorporation of technology in Arabic teaching will have a positive impact on Arabic language education. Finally, the language learning environment should be dynamic and student-centred. Teachers should help foster this kind of environment by acknowledging the role that language learners can play in the classroom context.

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