

# What Arab Students Say about Their Linguistic and Educational Experiences in Canadian Universities

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## Abstract

In this inquiry, I examine the cross educational experiences of ten Arab undergraduate students in two English-language universities in Montreal. Participants were from Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco and have been in Canada for three to seven years.

Classic qualitative methodological tools of in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis were employed to record, analyze and interpret the experiences of these students. In order to give voice to these students' insights and experiences, a narrative approach is used in presenting and interpreting the data.

Three themes identified as educational issues emerged from the analysis: Student-Teacher Relationship; Teaching Methodology; Teaching and learning foreign languages and Examinations. The analysis revealed differences in culture, language, and social and educational systems between these students' countries of origin and Canada as the major sources of these students' positive and negative experiences. The study concludes that Canadian educators can assist these students by becoming aware of their home culture, different learning styles, frustrations in adjusting to school life and in overcoming cultural shock; and by helping them adjust to Canadian educational system and learn about the Canadian culture.

**Keywords:** teaching methods, language proficiency, cultural influences, memorization, learning style, learning experience, foreign students

## 1. Introduction

Many studies have been conducted to investigate the experience of immigrants in Western host societies, such as USA, Canada, Australia and Britain (e.g., Tran, 2013; Watkins, Razee, & Richters, 2012; Bista, 2012; Chuang, 2012). However, to date, a search of the literature has yielded only few studies on Arab communities in North America. Those that do exist have focused exclusively on Lebanese and Syrian communities (e.g., Haddad, Smith & Esposito, 2003; 1996; Fahlman, 1983; Haj-Yahia, 1997; Abu-Rabia, 1997) or other non-Arab Islamic populations such as Iranians, Pakistanis and Malaysians (e.g., Yousif, 1992; Hofman, 1990; Talbani, 1991; Qureshi & Qureshi, 1983). Research-based evidence of Arabs' adaptive experience is rather limited, and much of it tends to explore only certain aspects of their problematic relationships with the host society.

This study examines some of the cultural-linguistic challenges facing ten Arab students (four women and six men) from four different areas of the Middle East and North Africa (i.e., Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco) attending English-language universities in Canada. Despite the existence of a substantial Arab population in the USA and Canada (Haddad, Smith, & Esposito, 2003), there is a lack of research on their educational and linguistic experience in these societies in general. Scarcity of educational research on Arab Muslim immigrants have compelled and inspired me to conduct an in-depth examination of the issues of adaptation and integration identified by Arab Muslim students in Canada. I expect that my findings will contribute positively to the discourse on cultural adaptation, specifically as it pertains to the adaptation and integration of Arab Muslim students.

This study does not aim to make generalizations about a people that constitute about two hundred million and live in twenty-two Arabic countries or alternatively about 31 million Canadians of diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds. The experiences and perceptions of the ten students in this study are but a window on the "types" of experiences, expectations Arab students might bring with them to their Canadian classrooms. The

major research question for this study is: how do Arabic students describe their learning experience in Canadian universities?

## 2. Language and Adjustment

One factor closely related to social adjustment is the language difference between mainstream and minority groups. Language is both the symbol of ethnic identity and the most profound expression of culture (Watkins, Razee, & Richters, 2012; Kuo, 2011; Phakiti & li, 2011; Geertz, 1973). Many sociolinguists acknowledge that language and culture are dimensions of each other, interrelated and inseparable. Language both reflects and shapes one's world view. Stress arises when people from different linguistic backgrounds cannot meet their everyday needs as they would in their own culture. They are unable, or find it difficult to communicate; they can not make themselves understood; they can not figure out why hosts speak or behave the way they do (Watkins, Razee, & Richters, 2012; Kuo, 2011; Ogbu, 1998; Krywulak, 1997). Watkins, Razee, & Richters, (2012), for example, found that lack of proficiency in the host language was the most frequently mentioned problem of adjustment by foreign students.

Canadian society is made up of many groups divided by differences in ethnicity, language, culture, religion and other social and economic characteristics. While the aboriginal peoples were the first inhabitants of Canada and have continued to play a marginal role in Canadian society, English and French are the dominant social and demographic groups. They are the ones who founded the constitution on which the country was built as well as the institutions and systems (e.g., education, health, banking, government, transportation) that provide the social frameworks that define the Canadian way of life. However, Canada is not comprised of these originating cultures only. It has a constantly changing, multicultural presence that encompasses a diverse population representing almost all of the peoples and nations of the world. There is a reciprocal impact of all these groups on each other and on the society at large. This diversity is naturally extended into schools where many of these minority groups are represented.

As minority groups attempt to maintain their distinct identities and ways of life, some psycho-social issues and problems begin surfacing. Research (e.g., Guo & Chase, 2011; Gertzog, 2011; Zhou, Frey & Bang, 2011; Talbani, 1991; Waite, 1991) has documented that the problems that ethnic-minority students face in Canadian schools arise from having to adjust to a new culture and to function in an unfamiliar linguistic setting, "the school". For the purposes of this study, "the school" is treated as an agent of socialization (Dewey, 1902/1996) into the dominant culture. The difficulties of adaptation may be conceptualized in terms of the difference between the values and expectations of the home and those of the culture into which newcomers are attempting to integrate.

## 3. Methodology

In this study, qualitative research methods—participant observation and informal interviews are used. Data are gathered primarily through participant observations and informal interviews. There are two considerations for choosing this research project. First, it is believed that the research question will be better answered, understood and explained through interpreting and describing rather than measuring. Second, the research questions are general, broad, open-ended and flexible. There are no previously set hypothesis to be used.

The purpose of this study is not to seek explanations and predictions that will generalize to other people and places, but a "deeper understanding" of the issues from the perspectives of a small (10) sample of students.

## 4. Research Site and Participants

This study was conducted at two major universities in Montreal, Canada. Meeting a large number of students with different academic backgrounds from the Arabic communities in Montreal helped me to decide criteria for the inquiry. To achieve "maximum variation sampling" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1993, p. 56), I varied the participants by (a) domain of study (Arts, Engineering and Science); (b) country of origin (Libya, Tunis, Algeria, and Morocco); and (c) gender (7 men, 3 women). Using these criteria ensured that the study would be kept to a manageable size while permitting in-depth inquiry. It ensured that it would be possible to obtain the participants' points of view, expressed in their own words. From this group emerged 8 participants who met the criteria and agreed to participate. Their commonalities were that they were Arab-Muslims, first generation immigrants who received part of their education in their countries of origin and were undergraduates enrolled in two English universities in Montreal.

## 5. Findings and Discussions

### 5.1 Emergent Themes

Participants have provided us, from their own perspectives, with a picture of the ways of learning in their home

countries and their experiences in Canadian classrooms. Their narratives illustrate fundamental differences in educational philosophies and practices in their home countries and Canada. Three major themes emerged from the analysis of the data; they are discussed under the rubric of teaching methodology, teaching and learning foreign languages and examinations.

### 5.2 Teaching Methodology

According to the participants, memorization and rote learning are widely used in their home country's educational system for the learning process. They report favorably about the pedagogy styles used in their Canadian classrooms and emphasized the fact that the student is the focal point of learning. They feel that the education they receive in Canada teaches them to develop critical thinking and improves their communicative strategies. Cooperative learning and dialogues were frequently cited as the most outstanding components of university education in Canada. Although they have had many difficulties adjusting to the way Canadian professors teach, they usually appreciate the de-emphasis on memorization in favor of critical analysis, and the encouragement of wide-ranging classroom discussion, including criticism of the views of professors.

The students' reflections on their university experience also centered upon the organization of classroom discussion. According to many of them, it was only when they started their studies in Canada that they realized that effectiveness of learning is related to the two-way communication in class and not only to the excellence of the teacher. When they were asked about any differences in pedagogical styles between their previous and current experiences, Noora mentioned cooperative learning:

*I do not think that cooperative learning or student-centered classrooms are known to many teachers over there (his home country)...it is very traditional system...teachers stand in front of students and talk, talk and talk and that is it...we (i.e., Arab students) are very passive, just listening and writing down what they say and that is it all...look, now we have been an independent country for almost 40 years, have you ever heard that there is any discovery or invention from there, why is that? ...I think the answer is clear...because they do not encourage creative thinking, it has never been in their agenda (Ali).*

Samira talked about an emphasis on understanding:

*of course there are many and sometimes contrasting differences between the two systems.....take the study material for example...in my home country the focus is more on quantity.....a lot of information and there is extreme emphases on memorizing details rather than absorbing and understanding information (Samira).*

Malik spoke about student participation:

*methods of teaching are different in the two countries...here (in Canada), students are included, they participate, discuss, argue, ask for more explanations...but there teachers dictate and that is it...I remember sometimes we spend the whole class writing down what the teacher dictates to us...I think this is just wasting of time (Malik).*

Noora's reflection on Arab and Muslim approaches to learning stems from both her knowledge of Arabic history and her exposure to Western-style pedagogy:

*I really don't know why we use this backward approach to learning...one in fact feels sad when one thinks of the glorious past of the Arabs and their contributions to the human civilization...Muslims were pioneers in all aspects of knowledge, you name it....their approach to learning was liberal and they were open to other civilizations: the Greek and Roman....they put everything under investigation....they were secure and confident of themselves....that is why they led the world... I think...we have to interact with advanced countries...I am not saying you have to be secular to advance, not at all....I think we have to combine the two; Islamic and Western...Arabs succeeded before in that....Jaber who invented the zero and Algebra was a very religious man and used to do his studies in the mosque....can't we learn from that? (Noora).*

Memorization and rote learning play important roles in the content of Arabic students' learning and in their attitudes toward learning (Rugh, 2002; Cook, 1999). Because of their education, Arabs have deep-rooted sensitivity and a special fascination with their classic poetry, metaphor and literature (Barakat, 1993). In Arabic countries, children of eight or nine years can recite or sing from memory tens and sometimes hundreds of poetic lines or Quranic verses. In Arabic culture, it is rewarding to the child to exhibit his/her memorization skills to admiring adults. In fact, this ability has an influence even on how some Arab families view their child's academic progress or relative lack thereof.

Today, many people and even some professors continue to believe that rote learning is the best way to teach children. When Arab people say "instruction during childhood is like carving on a rock", they are referring to rote learning. Arab children in elementary schools are seated in rows and receive explicit instructions in numbers,

letters and characters. They participate only when asked to recite verses of the Holy Book, Arabic alphabet, multiplication tables or Arabic poems. Good performance is encouraged and high achievers are readily acknowledged and rewarded by their teachers. It is clear that there is continuity between early learning strategies in Arabic elementary schools and the strategies students adopt in later learning.

### 5.3 Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages

Although all participants were taught English and French as foreign or second languages before coming to Canada, they were critical of the approach used in learning a second language. According to many of them, their previous knowledge of English in their home countries has not significantly helped them to survive and to succeed in their transition to this new environment. As is the case with other subjects, language classrooms in Arabic countries also rely on the reproductive style of learning: language is treated as static rather than living:

*I studied English in public school but when I came to Canada, I felt as if it was a different language I was learning...it is true that I have some vocabulary but unable to use them in real life situations (Samira).*

*I joined an intensive English program in Canada for several months upon arrival ....the way they taught English is completely different from the one in (X)...they make you feel that you make use of the language...they engage you in a lot of discussions and debates which makes you able to practice the vocabulary in your mind...they want you to be fluent in the language regardless of the grammatical errors you make...to me it is the same way as kids learning their first language....that is I think how you learn the language...there (i.e., back home) they bombard you with many rules and make you very nervous when you try to speak the language (Shadi).*

*...even in teaching English they (i.e., Arab teachers) use the same methods...they give you some new English words today and you have to be ready for tomorrow to memorize their spellings by heart...they do not put them in context to show how they are used...they did not teach communicative skills....we had to remember grammatical rules by heart...you feel as if it is not a language at all...it is similar to mathematical rules...when I came to Canada, I found myself I know a lot of words but I can not use them...I could not communicate effectively with Canadians (Omar).*

*...the language school I went to in Canada...they, it is very clear, emphasize communication...from the first class, teachers divide you into groups and you start practicing with other students and teachers listen to you and correct you if you mispronounce a word...I think that is the best way to teach language....they teach you grammar also but always in a context...in other words, while you are learning grammatical rules, you develop communicative strategies (Ahmed).*

Whereas the Arab approach to learning a second language emphasizes decontextualized knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, the Canadian approach to learning stresses communication skills, language use and the process of learning. Arabic societies tend to value formalities in public contexts and this seems to be true of schools. Hence, formality is more important than creativity in the language class. Students are expected to memorize someone else's correct sentences instead of creating new sentences for themselves. Therefore, even though Arab students arrive in Canadian classrooms with claims for proficiency in English, it may be that they lack communicative skills in the language.

Writing skills are highly valued in Canadian universities. Several participants said that they have relatively little experience of writing extended and systematic discourse even in their own language, much less in English:

*I have never been taught how to write critically neither in Arabic nor in English. I still remember only one course in Arabic language arts titled "rhetoric" in which you are taught only how to write a few paragraphs on a general topic (Saleh).*

*This was all new to me....here teachers expect you to know how to systematically organize your ideas and have valid arguments...you have to know how to write academic report in English (Shadi).*

*Teachers do not see it as their role to show you how to write reports...one of my teachers did not accept my work for three times...I was going nuts...he did not tell me what to do...one of my classmates referred me to a course for developing English writing skills and I took it for the whole year....I felt much better (Malik).*

These students grew up speaking and writing in their mother tongue, which is entirely different language from English. Other European languages, such as French and German, are different languages from English but they at least belong to the same alphabetic system. So it is easier for French- and German-speaking people to learn English than Arabic-speaking people. Here too the mismatch between the past experience of these Arab students and the expectations of Canadian academic staff comes into sharp focus. Where essays are required, there is a concentration on mastering the art of Arabic rhetoric based on extensive reading of literary works, rather than argumentative essays based on a thesis statement and a critical analysis of one or more sides of an issue. This

problem could be one of the reasons that Arab students tend to go into business, science and engineering, where students expertise in written and spoken intellectual discourse is less critical.

#### 5.4 Examinations

All participants talked about exams and their impact on their learning approach. It is important to note that entrance into a higher stage of education in many Arabic countries is based solely on examination scores. In other words, the decision as to what academic discipline one enrolls in can sometimes also depend simply on how high one's grades are. There are criteria delineated by the government. Other means of evaluation, common in some Western countries, letters of recommendation, personal teacher evaluations, a student's statement of career objectives, and so on, do not always have a place in the system. Examinations are given in a wide variety of subjects – they do not focus on the subjects that would provide the core in the student's intended program of studies, where, presumably, the student ought to have extra strength. Saleh experienced the consequences of this policy:

*....exams play a crucial role...passing exams is the goal students strive for....everything depends on getting high marks...at the university level, every faculty has a minimum mark to be eligible for admission....they do not have any other considerations such as recommendation letters or supplementary exams....for example, I wanted to study in the faculty of agriculture after I finished high school but their requirement was 75% and I got 74%..they did not allow me because of this, although my record showed very high marks in chemistry, botany and zoology...all of my teachers thought I would be an excellent student in the faculty of agriculture but teachers are not in position to influence such matters...I think this is stupid...because I did not do that well in history, Arabic and geography, my GPA was affected and thus I was not accepted...These courses have nothing to do with my studies in the agriculture domain...but who can discuss this with those closed-minded in the administration (Saleh).*

The emphasis on passing examinations and acquiring certificates has a negative consequence. Students' heads can be full of information as a result of memorizing, but it does not necessarily mean they have much real understanding of it. Students seek to pass their exams without understanding, hoping to obtain a degree in order to secure a good job with a high salary or obtain an admission to a higher institution. Participants noted the different approaches to examinations in Canada:

*Canadian teachers use essay-type questions and to answer them you must include your opinion and thoughts...there, it is just point-form questions in which you do not include your contribution (Samira).*

*....passing exams is a crucial part of students' life in (X)...students take it easy the whole year until the exam period, then they start cramming....you have to memorize the material...some students resort to cheating....some teachers try to deceive students by giving vague questions....I still remember one of my teachers who used to get happy as no one could answer one of his questions because of its vagueness.....you feel as if it is a competition between teachers and students....one of my teachers used to say to us (you get zero if you miss my exam)...he is not considerate at all...he always reminded us of the two excuses he accepted for being absent from exams (if you are in hospital or in jail), no other reason, to him, justifies absence (Leila).*

*.....I did not see this kind of attitude in Canada....most teachers here are very considerate...they would give you every chance to prove that you understood the material....sometimes they even let you have supplementary exams....you feel that their goal is to make sure that you understand the material, not to be in a competition or challenge with you (Omar).*

In brief, one can say that in a system that is test-driven, students are interested more in developing their test-taking strategies than their study skills. Learning for the love of learning (Palmer, 1998) can only be rare when examinations are both a product of the emphasis on memorization, and a reinforcement of that method.

Communicative language teaching is supposed to be the most prevailing method in TEFL, but if teachers have to prepare students for such examinations, they cannot teach English without using grammar-translation techniques. Although translation could be a suitable technique to check students' understanding of the text in detail, it doesn't necessarily work towards a final goal of understanding or producing texts.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I attempted to record the educational experiences of eight Arab students in their Canadian university classrooms. While I posed questions during interviews pertaining to their Canadian university experiences, the students initiated comparisons with their educational experience in their home countries. Analysis of their narratives suggests that the participants have had fairly common educational experiences both in their home countries and in their new country; they differ in the ways that they have responded to these experiences.

Participants have provided us, from their own perspectives, with a picture of the ways of learning in their home countries and their experiences in Canadian classrooms. Their narratives illustrate fundamental differences in

educational philosophies and practices in their home countries and Canada. Since participants have lived in Canada for a short period, they may still be in the “early stage” of culture shock as mentioned by Oberg (1960). At this stage of adaptation, sojourners experience “confusion in role, role expectations, values and self identity” (p.168). In many cases, these students are trapped between two sets of conflicting experiences. Problems such as teacher-dominated classrooms, lessons followed by memorization and recitation and rote learning, and obsolete textbooks is common in the educational background of some Arabic students coming to Canada to study.

There is obviously much in Canadian classrooms that runs counter to these students’ experiences. This study shows us that it is not easy to be a cross cultural learner. It requires courage, determination and persistence to succeed in doing so. There are many cultural elements that the learners need to adjust to, get used to, learn or unlearn. But on the whole, it is a very rewarding and great learning experience. As many researchers (e.g., Watkins, Razee, & Richters, 2012; Halic, Greenberg & Paulus, 2009; Andrade, 2009) report, English language proficiency usually ranks at the top of foreign students’ problems in their adjustment, almost all of the participants in this study mentioned lack of English as a major problem. Although all of the students had studied EFL for several years in their home countries, they were required by university to join intensive ESL courses at McGill or Concordia language schools for at least six month prior to their academic studies and they reported favorably on the linguistic and communicative skills they could develop. Some were enrolled in extra English writing courses as recommended by their professors.

The experiences described by these students at these two Canadian universities suggest that the Canadian classrooms have retained important aspects of what may be described as its interactive and cooperative character. Students approve of the dialectical format of Canadian instruction. They have many positive comments about Canadian university systems and the organization of classroom instruction, which they favor overwhelmingly. The most complimentary statements were addressed to the ways that classes provided students with considerable opportunities for practicing natural language in a variety of situations and using language material authentic to native speakers of English. They approved of the fact that students are encouraged and supported to work on all four skills from the beginning. Students emphasize that in their Canadian language classrooms they do more than regurgitate answers that teachers would like to hear or see in the examinations. In other words, they learn the language and not just know about the language.

These students’ views and insights are of concern to all of us as language teachers, teacher educators, curriculum developers, and textbook writers. Teaching methods in the Arabic schools that these students experienced overlook the intercultural awareness as a crucial component of second language proficiency and these methods emphasize developing linguistic competence over developing communicative-intercultural performance. In addition to their need to knowledge of forms and meanings and functions, learners must be able to use this knowledge and take into consideration the social situation in order to convey the intended meaning appropriately. Communication is a process; knowledge of the

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