

Defining Heritage Language Learners of Arabic: Linguistic and Cultural Factors

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Abstract : Heritage language learners (HLL) are part of the linguistic reality in Foreign Language Learning (FLL). These learners present several characteristics that are different from non-heritage language learners. They have a personal connection with the language and their motivation to learn the language is partly because of this personal connection. In Canada there is a large diversity in the foreign language learning classroom; the Arabic language classroom is no exception. The Arabic HLL is unique for more than one reason. First, is the fact that the Arabic language is spoken across twenty-two Arab countries across the Arab World. Across the Arab World there is a standard variation and a local dialect that co-exist side by side, i.e. diagglossia exists in a strong and unique way as a feature of Arabic. Second, Arabic is the language that all Muslims across the Muslim World use for their prayers. This raises a number of points when we consider Arabic as a Heritage Language; namely the role of diagglossia, culture and religion. The fact that there is a group of learners that can be regarded as HLL who are not of Arabic speaking background but are Muslims and use the language for religious purposes is unique, thus course developers and language instructors need take this into consideration. The paper takes a closer look at this distinction and establishes sub-groups the Arabic HLLs in a language and/or culture specific way related mainly to the Arabic HLL. It looks at the learners at the beginners' Arabic class at the undergraduate university level over a period of three years in order to define this learner. Learners belong to different groups and backgrounds but they all share common characteristics. The paper presents a detailed look at the learner types present at this class in order to help prepare and develop material for this specific learner group. The paper shows that separate HLL and non-HLL courses, especially at the introductory and intermediate level, is successful in resolving some of the pedagogical problems that occur in the Arabic as a Foreign Language classroom. In conclusion, the paper recommends the development of HLL courses at the early levels of language learning. It calls for a change in the pedagogical practices to overcome some of the challenges learner in the introductory Arabic class can face.

Keywords : Arabic, Heritage Language, language learner, teaching

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