

## **Factors Influencing Arabic Language Maintenance In the United States**

**Dr. Manal Alghazo**

College of Educational Sciences  
Mu'tah University

**Abstract:** This paper identifies the major factors involved in the Arabic speaking community's efforts to maintain Arabic as a native language in the United States. It discusses the effect of ethnic identity, religion, the role of the parents, and the role of school on the maintenance of Arabic as a native language. The study was conducted by interviewing students, parents, and teachers in an Arab American community in a Midwestern town in the United States. In addition to interviews, classroom observations were also conducted at the school held at the local Mosque. The findings revealed that among the factors that influence language maintenance are ethnic identity, religion, school, and parents' role. Results showed that all these are factors positively influence language maintenance among the Arab American group in this study.

### **Introduction**

Language minority groups in the United States feel that it is important to maintain their native languages. Maintaining the native language from one generation to the next may not be an easy task. It takes a lot of efforts on the part of the parents and individuals in the community. This paper concentrates on the efforts of an Arab American community to maintain the Arabic language in the U.S where English is the language of majority.

This paper therefore attempts to identify major factors involved in the Arab speaking community's efforts to foster and maintain its language (i.e. Arabic). The paper presents discussions of how the community as a whole and several families in particular have worked toward maintenance of the Arabic language in a medium sized Midwestern town. In so doing, this study contributes to the knowledge base on language maintenance and second language literacy development of the Arab-American community, a language minority group that has been viewed as an invisible minority in the U.S. as discussed by Nieto (1996) in her book *Affirming Diversity*.

### **Arabs in the United States: Some Historical Background**

Arab immigration to the US began in the late nineteenth century. Most of the early immigrants were Christian males who were unskilled, poor and primarily illiterate (Rouchdy,1992). The first immigrants were mostly from Lebanon due to the political climate in the home country at that time. They settled primarily in Michigan and New York City, forming in New York what was then known as the Syrian colony (Dweik,1992). Another wave of Arab immigrants occurred after World War II. Within this second wave there were a number of Muslim Arabs (Rouchdy,1992). The third wave of immigrants occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. It consisted of students and professionals from Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon (Elkholy, 1969). And finally the fourth wave of Arab immigrants occurred during 1970s and 80s, mostly Lebanese and Palestinians, due to the war in Lebanon and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict over the West Bank and Gaza (Rouchdy,1992). Most immigrants tended to settle in Ohio, Michigan, and New York (Dweik,1992; Daher,1992).

At first, assimilation to American society was encouraged. Ethnicity and a foreign accent were considered a handicap to elevating one's status in the community. Thus it was understandable that the Arab immigrants during the late 1800s leaned more towards assimilation to US society and further disassociating themselves from their home language and their home ethnicity. A revival of ethnicity occurred however, among the third wave of Arab immigrants, as a result of first, the Civil Rights movement in the United States during the late 50s and 60s. This movement encouraged racial

and ethnic identity and rejected what was then known as the "*melting pot*" concept.

Second, continued political difficulties in several Arab countries spurred further immigration to the US, which led to an increase in the number of Arabic speakers, this in turn led to social contact and to the use of Arabic as the means of communication. Third, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in both Arab countries and among Arab-Americans, which led to the increased need for the language in order to fulfill religious deeds (Rouchdy, 1992). This revival of the Arabic language led to the awareness of Arabic language maintenance among Arab Americans and, consequently, efforts to maintain the Arabic language were underway.

## **Literature Review**

### **Language Maintenance**

Immigration to the US does not mean that the people are willing to forsake their linguistic and cultural heritage and adapt themselves to the new environment. They do not have to give up their native language in order to be assimilate of into the main society. In his study of language maintenance and language shift, Dweik (1992) reported that some of the factors that contributed to the maintenance of the Arabic language among Lebanese Christians in Buffalo in the early parts of the century were their positive attitudes toward Arabic language and culture and second, the nature of the migration in the early days. Most immigrants planned to return home after they sought their fortune in the US. Third, the social background of these immigrants helped to maintain the native language and culture since they were villagers with little or no education.

Jiyad (1996) conducted a study on language maintenance/development among Arab-American students who learned English as a second language and who attended the Arabic Language and Culture Institute (ALCI) in Northfield, Massachusetts, between 1990 and 1992. He conducted a survey study using a questionnaire designed to elicit information on the environment, attitudes, perceptions, involvement and feeling of students and their parents that seemed to pertain to language maintenance at the individual level. He reported the following findings:

First, students become bilingual after several years of living in the second language environment; however, the longer the length of residency the more monolingual in the second language they become. Second, he found that parental involvement positively influenced the maintenance of the Arabic language. The more the parents stressed the use of native language at home and at gatherings, the more it is maintained. Third, he found that the Sunday school plays a small role in native language maintenance but it is the way the school's services are utilized by the individual learner that has an effect on maintenance.

Clyne (1985, 1991), shows that language maintenance is impacted by several factors such as presence of grandparents (i.e. extended family), the opportunities for trips to the home country, the opportunity to study the home language as an externally examined subject at school, use of native language by parents, the presence of older siblings especially those born in the home country, and the developmental stage at which migration occurred. Grosjean (1982) argues that several factors about language maintenance within minority groups in the US are apparent. First, whether a group considers its immigration permanent is important. The feeling of returning to the home country encourages maintenance. Second, isolation is a concern. A group that doesn't interact with other minority groups encourages maintenance. Third, is the effect of religion, and finally attitude toward the native language. Positive attitudes lead toward language maintenance, as will be discussed later in this study.

### **Religion and Ethnic Identity**

Walbridge (1992) discussed the maintenance of the Arabic language in the Dearborn mosque among shi'a Lebanese in Dearborn, Michigan. She also discussed the role Islam plays in the preservation of the Arabic language, especially because immigrant languages in the US are most likely no longer in use after the third generation. She reported that Muslims in the Dearborn area in Michigan seem convinced that religion more than anything else differentiates them from the mainstream U.S life. Thus religion appears to be the strongest basis of group identity among the shi'a Muslims in the Dearborn Mosque.

Maintenance of language for the Arab community means maintenance of Islam. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States today (Speck, 1997). The Qur'an is written in Arabic and could only be recited in Arabic, every Muslim (Arab or non-Arab) must be able to recite the Holy Qur'an. For example, according to Scribner and Cole (1974) Vai people in a town called Gohn learn to read the Qur'an, not necessarily understanding it. The Imam then explains the passages as the students read them. Thus, non-Arab Muslims must learn how to read Arabic in order to be complete Muslims. As a matter of fact the first verse of the Qur'an to have been revealed to Prophet Mohammed (SW) stresses the importance of reading or education.

Reading here also means literacy. Religion is a factor of preserving the Arabic language for both Muslims as well as Christians. Arab Christians wanted to build Eastern rite churches using Arabic (Sawaie, 1992). Currently immigrants of various faiths use Arabic for worship. Sawaie (1992) reported that out of 38 places of worship, 21 were Muslim of various dominations, and seventeen were Christian also of various dominations.

The strength of ethnic identity is very important to consider in language maintenance. Walbridge (1992) argues that people who have a strong ethnic identity, and who due to a sense of insecurity associate little outside their group and perceive their group's boundaries as "hard and closed" and viability as poor will tend to maintain their language. In a study of the maintenance of Vietnamese language in Australia, Ninnes (1996) reported that students who identify themselves as Vietnamese speak more native language to parents, friends, siblings, in the classroom, in stores and in restaurants...etc. She explains that the recommendation to maintain the native language is for the sake of identity and culture.

### **Community & Parents' Roles**

The community as a whole plays an important role in language preservation. A close-knit network provides better chances of maintaining the native language. Speakers are able to form a cohesive group that is able to resist linguistic and social pressure from outside the group (Milroy 1980). If the community is able to keep distant from the mainstream society, from the processes and values of the American core society then language

maintenance is apt to be stronger in that group (Fishman, 1977). In his study of Meronite Lebanese immigrants who reside in Buffalo, New York, Dweik (1992) stated that their tightly knit community which was supported by kinship, played a major role in preserving the traditions, customs, language and religious practices. Because maintenance of language implies that language is transmitted from one generation to the next, the home is considered the most important of all language domains, as well as such domains as the school and work place (Edwards, 1997).

Parent involvement is very important to the students' learning of the native language (McConnell, 1989; Fishman, 1977). Workman and Gage (1997) reported that in order for a family-school partnership to work three conditions must be fulfilled. First, both parties believe that they bring something valued to the relationship; second, that both have something in common which is the welfare of the child; and third, a shared sense of responsibility around the common goal. Jiyad (1996) emphasized the importance that parents play in Arabic language maintenance. As a matter of fact, he claimed that parental involvement and encouragement to use Arabic plays a more important role in language maintenance than do religion or the opportunity to travel in the Middle East. He states that children whose parents showed unusual supportive attitude to maintaining the native language actually did maintain the language.

Fishman (1966) in his book on Hungarian language maintenance in the United States, reported that the family is the primary factor in influencing the native language maintenance. "Continued use and proficiency in the native language (Admittedly, a variant of standard Hungarian) now depends primarily upon the family...", Fishman (1966: 41). Also Nieto (1996) stresses the role of the family on children's academic success. She showed how, in her study, the participants expressed how their parents encouraged them and had an influence on them in school although they were too busy with work to actually participate in school activities

### **School & Teachers' Role**

Schools play an important role in language maintenance. For example, in Guatemala, Spanish is gradually replacing the Mayan language, As a consequence, Guatemala Mayas started a program to reinforce their

language. They did that by starting an academy of Mayan language. They established "a unified" alphabet for the Mayan languages, as well as private "Maya" schools to create a more favorable image for the Mayan languages (England, 1998). " The Mayan leadership hopes to be able to slow language loss measurably, and believes that their language Academy is critical to accomplish that" (England, 1998: 78). Walbridge, (1992) also states that the mosque is the focal point of Arabic language maintenance because it hosts the schools, reading of Qur'an, prayers, sermons, and also serves as a social center for social activities.

Bilingual education is also a factor in native language maintenance (Cohen, 1975). Researchers in bilingual education have shown that native language education strengthens the child's cognitive ability in the second language. Contrary to Walbridge (1992), Jiyad (1996) stated that schooling that is geared toward strict religious purposes did not seem to have a positive effect on language maintenance. Students who attended such schools reported very negative attitudes. Children identify more with a curriculum that reflects their culture and background.

The reason I include teachers in this paper is that efforts to maintain any native language also include the teacher. Nieto (1996) explained that teachers play a vital role. She/he can create conditions to motivate the students to learn and to become critical thinkers. She also explains that the teacher also needs to have an expanded repertoire of teaching skills and methods.

The teachers play a great role in motivating children to learn the native language. " Research is beginning to show that approaches are more successful when they try to enhance and expand the teachers current repertoire of instructional strategies rather than radically altering them" (Gersten & Jimenez, 1994). The teacher's style of instruction, her use of language, and her use of different strategies all help keep the students motivated and help enhance their learning ability. Gersten & Jimenez (1994) argue that the teacher's instructional approach leads to high levels of student's involvement by fostering higher order of cognitive processes and enables students to participate in extended discourse. Nieto (1996) explains how the teacher has a great influence on the child's learning and attitude towards school. Almost all her participants mentioned a teacher who had an

effect on them. They looked for the virtue of caring among the teachers; how well she/he makes the class interesting, and the methods she/he use in the classroom.

The teachers' role is important in language maintenance. The community as a whole contributed to language maintenance through establishing the school and through organizing social events and gatherings which also contribute to language maintenance (Nieto, 1996). Since the teacher is a focal figure in the school then she plays a great role in enhancing native language literacy. The characteristics that a child looks for in a teacher is caring (Nieto, 1996). These students need to feel that the teacher cares about them. They need to feel that the teacher is there because she wants them to learn, she cares about them, and that her main goal is to get the point across to them and hopefully encourage them to go on and to succeed. The measure the students take for a teacher's caring is the amount of time they invest in caring for their students, their patience, the pedagogy they use to make the class interesting and whether or not they prepare well for the class ( Nieto, 1996).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions this study attempts to answer are.

1. What attitudes do Arab American children have toward their Arabic culture and language?
2. In what ways does religion influence language maintenance among Arab Americans?
3. What roles do parents play in maintaining their children's Arabic language?
4. What roles do the schools play in maintaining children's Arabic language?



## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study include 4 children, 3 Parents, and 2 teachers. Of the four children, three were born and raised in the United States, and the fourth one had moved to the US six years ago. Two were boys and two were girls. Their ages vary between eleven years old to sixteen years of age. Rawan is the oldest. She is sixteen years old. Their parents have migrated to the united states permanently to provide them with a better life style than they would have at home. All these students are successful in their academics, in the All-American schools. All of them speak a dialect of Arabic but the main language they speak is English. Their level of proficiency in Arabic varies depending on the age and whether or not they have visited the home country. It also depends on the amount of literacy instruction they received at home. All of them were willing to talk about the school, the teachers and about their knowledge of Arabic. Traditional norms dictate that Arab students listen and respond respectfully to an older person speaking to them.

Among the participants were three mothers, one of whom is also a teacher. Fatima, Randa, and Dina. All of them went through the struggle of trying to teach their children the Arabic language and the Arabic culture. Their children vary in age and in their ability to speak Arabic. As for the teachers in this study they are Dina, and Muna, both of whom have a two-year college degree.

### **Instruments**

#### **Classroom Observations**

A total of four observations were conducted. Each observation lasted for three hours, approximately twelve hours in all. The researcher used handwritten notes as well as tape recorder to record classroom activities. The focus of the observations was material taught in class and the method used in presenting this material by the teacher. Also the researcher focused on both the teachers' role as well as the students' roles in the classroom. She recorded the students' responses to the material observing both their verbal

and their nonverbal actions such as yawning, grumbling and looking at each other and laughing...etc. She observed the close monitoring of the principal of the teachers.

These observations helped the researcher determine the degree of challenge the students were provided with. They also helped us see the amount of interest the school is investing in providing literacy for its young students. The observations also gave the researcher a picture of what the students prefer to be taught. What they do enjoy and what they don't enjoy, judging from their reactions to the lessons. During the observations close attention to the teacher-student interactions was paid, the students' enthusiasm and participation in the classroom. The researcher also observed the teachers strategies of teaching, and whether they were properly trained to teach a language class. The school meets for three hours every Sunday, one hour and fifteen minutes for each class. The first lesson is usually the grammar lesson and the second was for reading. The researcher also observed whether or not the teachers implemented new approaches of teaching.

### **Interviews**

A total of eight interviews were conducted. The interviews lasted about four to five hours collectively. Three mothers were interviewed, one of whom is also a teacher at the school. The interviews were handwritten and audiotaped. The interviews were conducted at the participants' homes. Informal interviews with the teachers were also conducted throughout the study. All interviewees were asked about their perception of Arabic literacy in the United States.

The parents shared their experiences in teaching their children the native language. They also shared their thoughts on how they wanted the school in the community to provide literacy development for their children. They also expressed the reasons that lie behind their eagerness to want their children to learn the Arabic language. The teachers provided information about the material used at the school. They expressed their disagreements with the school, and the children provided answers to why they want to learn Arabic. The questions were designed to elicit open-ended answers. For

the purpose of clarification the researcher usually used follow up questions as well.

Some of the interview questions with parents and teachers were:

1. How important is it for you to maintain the native language (or to help your students, children maintain it)?
2. What measures did you implement to ensure native language literacy?
3. In what ways does the school help maintain the native language?
4. How is literacy important to Islamic teaching?
5. Why do you think these children need to know the Arabic language while living in the US?

Some of the interview questions with the children include the following:

1. Do you like the fact that you can speak Arabic? Why?
2. Which language do you prefer to speak and why?
3. Why do you think maintaining the Arabic language is important?
4. What is the most important thing that has helped you maintain the Arabic language?

### **Procedures :**

The observations conducted for this research were made in a local Mosque in central Illinois. This mosque serves as a religious, cultural, and linguistic center. It is the place where Muslims in the community head for prayer.

The mosque also hosts the Muslim students Association, which is an Association for Muslim students at the local university. The activities of the association are carried out at the mosque. At the time of writing this paper the mosque hosted three schools, one is the Islamic or Qur'anic school

where children learn to recite the holy Qur'an. The second is the Arabic Sunday (weekend School) where children learn Arabic literacy. The third school is a Muslim private school. This type of school is in its initial stages but its ultimate goal is to become the school for the children of the Muslim community. "one can assume that Arabic-using places of worship generally function as social centers, religious and social functions are likely to encourage the preservation of the shared traditional culture, of which language is a primary element" (Sawaie, 1992, p. 89).

During the making of the observations, the researcher audiotaped every session. In addition, she took notes consistently. Taking such notes as students' visual responses, their interaction through facial expressions or bodily gestures. Taking notes about the arrangement of the class of the seating of the students and so on. Then at home the researcher transcribed each observation writing down verbatim every interaction that was spoken on the tape. These written transcriptions along with the observer's notes were later used in data analysis to arrive at results for this study.

The second instrument selected for this study is the interviews. The researcher prepared a list of open-ended questions carefully selected to elicit open-ended responses by the interviewees. While interviewing participants the researcher audiotaped each interview, when necessary follow up questions were used to allow the interviewer to comment further on a certain point the researcher found to be of importance to the study. Each interview was transcribed in order to be analyzed later by the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques as described by Bogdan & Bicklen (1992), and Patton (1990). All observations and interviews were transcribed, and then translated into English. Data analysis began during data collection itself. Observer's comments were constantly written by the researcher consequently the researcher narrowed down what she was looking for in the next observation and so on.

The researcher read and reread the transcripts of all the data, writing main issues as she went along. Then she searched for each issue in each

interview and compared it to what she actually observed in the class. To facilitate this process she color-coded each main point or issue. She then read the materials several times to separate the information into separate categories. For example in order to isolate materials that have to do with parents' role in language maintenance the researcher read and reread the data and coded everything that has to do with parents' roles in green color. So, it was easy later on to go back and extract quotes for the results and the discussion of the study. Data were kept in their raw form and they were consulted when necessary. Each theme was used as a subheading in the results section. A detailed explanation followed each subheading accompanied by quotes by the participants when necessary.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Ethnic Identity**

The interviews revealed that the children in this study have great pride in their culture and background. They are not ashamed or embarrassed to say they are Arabs. They realize that they are part of two cultures. When asked whether she considers herself American or Arab, Rawan said " I am both, I am American and Arab, I know both cultures". Rawan also says " my parents have always stressed to me the importance of being Arab and of being muslim, I enjoy it very much when I go home to visit, I like spending time with my cousins and relatives, I miss that a lot when I return to the US."

In Nieto's book (1996) *Affirming Diversity*, students did not admit to being Americans. In her book Nieto conducted twelve case studies of immigrant youngsters to the United States. One of the case studies she included in her book is about a Lebanese boy (James). Nieto (1996, p. 164) explains that " to claim both is in effect to deny your background, to be a traitor to it." James, a Lebanese student in Nieto's book explained that when asked he makes sure to tell people that he is Lebanese not American. The students in Nieto's book were forced to choose by the society around them, and despite the negative messages and attitudes about ethnicity around them, they still chose their original heritage. They chose the culture of their homeland. The results of such a choice is that they will lose membership in

the dominating society and therefore be less empowered and have no right to claim a share of society's power (Nieto, 1996).

The students in the current study also identify themselves as Americans not denying at the same time their Arab identity. As a matter of fact they are very proud of the Arabic heritage they have especially because of its strong connection to the Islamic religion. As seen by the quote from Rawan's interview:

*"I wear the hijab to school as a matter of fact I wear it all the time, at school, at the mosque, at the supermarket. It tells people who I am. I am not afraid nor ashamed of who I am. I am an Arab and will always be Arab no matter how long I stay here in the US."*

The children in this study, in addition to identifying with the Arab culture and identity, they also don't deny that they are American at least by birth for some of them. Ahmad says "I am also both, I am Arab and American, I am American because I was born here and now I live here, so I am also American." But they continue to show nostalgia towards their homeland. Fawzi says "I love to go visit back home, it is a lot of fun, I get to be with my cousins, this I miss when I am back here in the US."

Nieto (1996) has associated academic success with culture maintenance and that students who maintain native culture are more likely to succeed in school. Yet other research shows that assimilation to the dominant culture is healthy and leads to success. In this study the children highly maintained the native culture. They were able to speak to us in the Arabic language, and they go to the Arabic school to try to continue to read and understand Arabic as a language, but they also associate with the dominant language. Yet they are successful in school. They all have great expectations of attending college. Rawan attends the University high school which only admits very successful students.

For children at the adolescence age, the feeling of belonging is very important. (Nieto, 1996). Nieto also states that in order for children to satisfy their feelings they among other extracurricular activities participate in ethnic group activities. For the children in this study going to the mosque

on Sundays to attend school and playing with friends in the mosque's yard gives them this sense of belonging to a certain group. The positive reinforcement they receive from parents and the Muslim community for participating in such activities encourages them even further. Their sense of belonging, which in turn, leads to a positive self esteem and eventually to success academically and socially. Students can support their academic success by seeking involvement in activities related to school or activities, which help them, meet their needs to belong. And by using their times in productive ways, and instead of focusing solely on academics, such activities help to round out the experiences of the students so that they lead fuller and more realistic lives.

The children in this study identified with both American and Arabian cultures. As opposed to Nieto's findings (1996), they did not feel that by confessing to be American they are abandoning their native identity. They felt comfortable being part of two cultures and identifying with both of them. Identifying with the Arab culture played a major role for language maintenance among this group of Arab Americans. The children in this study view themselves as Muslim Arabs, and Arab Americans simultaneously. Thus identity is very important in the maintenance of the native language.

### **The relationship between Islam and Arabic literacy**

The results in this study have also shown that religion plays an important role in the language maintenance among the participants as can be seen in the following quote by Fatima:

*I always tell them that Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) says I am proud of Arabic for three reasons: because I am Arabian, Islam is Arabic, and because it is the language of the people in heaven... so I tell them we should like Arabic not only because we are Arabs but because prophet Mohammad (PBUH) likes it. And I think this has helped me in maintaining the Arabic language among my children."*

Islam and the Arabic language are connected to each other. Islam was introduced to Arabia by Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). The teachings of Islam were dictated through the Holy Qur'an which is written in Arabic.

Even non Arab muslims have to have some literacy in Arabic in order to be able to read the Holy Qur'an. In this study parents stressed the importance of Arabic to their children from a religious perspective. Randa stresses this in the following quote.

*From a religious point of view it is very important for them to know Arabic, I continually remind them about the teachings of Islaam. I tell them this is "Hallal" Allowed, and this is "Haram" not allowed, food that we can and cannot eat. If they wake up with a nightmare they call on me to read for them from the Qur'an to protect them and to send the bad dreams away. I think that once Islam is instilled in them, they will realize the importance of the Holy Qur'an which is written in Arabic and the sayings of the prophet which are also originally written in Arabic"*

Religion thus plays a great role in the lives of muslim Arabs in this community. It has been a major factor toward maintenance of the native language. Because the Qur'an was revealed to prophet Mohammad in Arabic and because the prophet himself spoke Arabic it is a desire for every Muslim to learn the Arabic language.

Although it may not be the case for other communities, religion is an essential part of maintaining the Arabic language (Walbridge, 1992; Sawaie, 1992; Hofman, 1966). Thus religion (Islam) and the Arabic language are very closely knit and that is mainly what drives parents to do all they can to maintain the Arabic language. Fatima says " I feel bad when I hear them struggling to pronounce the Quran" . Not only are the parents concerned for religious reasons but rather the children themselves have grown relating to being Muslims rather than to being Arabs. They think of themselves as Muslims united by this religion, rather than Iraqi's, Egyptians or Jordanians. Having this bond of relatedness gives the children as well as the parents a sense of belonging, that is belonging or being part of a larger community.

The Muslim mosque in this community plays a vital role in language maintenance. By providing the Arabic language at the Sunday school, and by serving as a social center for gatherings where Arabic is spoken by many of the people attending events held there. Without the Arabic language the



spread of the beliefs and values of Islam could not be achieved and to spread these beliefs one has to learn the Qur'an, and the sayings of the prophet Mohammed which are conveyed in the Arabic language (Ezzaki, 1993). Literacy in most Arab countries began with the introduction and spread of Islam. In conclusion, the results of –the paper- hose shown that Islam plays a major factor in Arabic language maintenance among this group of Arab Americans.

### **Parents' Roles**

Like most concerned parents those interviewed are very much involved in their children's education. Women were chosen for this study, because they took on the responsibility of ensuring the literacy development for their children (Gregory, 1996). The fathers are too busy trying to provide the living expenses. Yet they are aware of the importance of native language literacy for their children, but they rely on their wives to care for it at home and at school. For some of these mothers, the Arabic school is only a recent addition to the Arabic community. They had to take on the responsibility of teaching the children themselves at home. Fatima is the oldest of the parent. Her sixteen-year-old daughter and thirteen-year-old son had non-formal teaching of the Arabic language. Her children heard and spoke Arabic at home. And they also heard and spoke Arabic at frequent Arab gatherings, as seen in the following quote.

*At home we only speak Arabic, first of all because our religion is Arabic, and our language is Arabic. And always we thought one day we will return home, so that they wouldn't be lost at school when we return... and also they will understand our relatives when they call them over the phone.*

Thus we see here that religion and the feeling of returning home, compelled Fatima to provide literacy in the Arabic language for her children. The father, being a graduate student at the time and later running a business in town, had no time to actually teach the children reading and writing in standard Arabic. Therefore, Fatima being a housewife took it upon herself to teach her children. She taught them the Arabic and Roman alphabet, how to join the letters together, which letters can or cannot connect. Some letters can connect while others have to end the syllable or

the word, where a new syllable or a new word begins separately. Fatima also says,

*I have Arabic curricula and I taught them at home... Rawan tested at home) until second grade with the Saudi curriculum as for Ahmad I didn't register him for testing but I taught him the same curriculum. Sometimes we switched to Jordanian curriculum as well.*

Thus she took the form of home schooling her children. She is more concerned with their ability to comprehend the written text. And to eventually be able to read books, the newspaper, magazine, etc. She does not punish them when they speak English but she ignores their questions and comments. But if they do speak Arabic they are praised and encouraged. When confronted with two languages bilingual children tend to use the language, which they feel, is more rewarding. Thus they have a language preference (Padilla & Lieberman, 1982 cited in Williams & Snipper, 1990).

Fatima's view of parents who didn't get involved in their children's Arabic literacy is that they "lost".

*Fatima: I think they lost a lot they lost pronunciation. There are sounds in Arabic that do not exist in English. Even if they learn at an older age it will not be the same as learning it as a child. I get mad when I hear them barely able to read the Qur'an. They are suffering trying to make some sounds.*

It is evident here that Fatima has developed her own concept of the critical period hypothesis. In order for children to learn a language as a native speaker would, they would have to learn it before the age of puberty. This is referred to in the literature as the critical period hypothesis, (Lenneberg, 1967; Bickerton, 1981). Unless these children are exposed to the language before the age of puberty they will not learn it as a native speaker would.

In preserving her children's native language Fatima is able to communicate with them. She can use her native language and they can

understand her. She does not have to learn the English language in order to speak to her children.

Randa is a young mom of three boys. She is extremely involved in their learning of the native language. Yet she is in a way lucky to have a school that can help her in teaching her children. However she does not rely totally on the school. She considers the school to be a kind of supplement to her own teaching of her children. First of all like Fatima she only speaks Arabic at home, as seen in the following quote:

*Randa: They are going to learn to speak English at school so if I speak to them in English now, they will forget Arabic.. They will be like the Americans when they try to learn Arabic... you know they speak funny. So why not have Arabic as the basic language and then they can learn English...*

Again Randa also has developed her own version of the critical period hypothesis. She too doesn't want her children to pass the age at which they can learn the language like a native speaker. Another point that Randa is making reference to here is additive bilingualism (Cummins 1981; Cummins & Swain 1986). She believes that learning a language while acquiring another is positive. Each language will complement the other, instead of being subtractive where learning of a second language means gradually losing the first (Cummins, 1981). Therefore Randa feels that it is her responsibility as a mother to teach her children their native language to keep them in touch with their roots and not to let them drift in the mainstream culture and forget their heritage.

Randa is very understanding of having this double culture her sons are living in,

*"I don't punish them when they speak English I don't want them to hate it. On the contrary I want them to love it, I don't want them to be afraid of it."*

She is using intrinsic motivation with her children. She is, to a certain extent, aware of the empowerment her children will receive by being American and knowing the English language (Cummins, 1986). She believes that in teaching language she is also teaching culture. To her the

Arabic culture is very important. They need to know how to behave how to speak and act in certain situations. When they go home for visits " I don't want them to be laughed at". She has many Arabic books, science, history, geography, and math... etc. She says she will try to teach them as much as she can, especially to teach them Islam and the teaching of Islam (i.e. proper behavior required by the religion).

Randa is applying the dual language immersion program. She provides native language instruction on weekends, while the regular school provides English instruction. Thus her children are exposed to two languages at the same time (Elford & Woodford, 1982 cited in Hurly, 1996), as seen in her following quote:

*I have the Arabic channel I keep it turned on all the time. Even if it is not children's programs. Also I brought books for them from home. Any books, religion, math, Arabic.. You know the curriculum they use in Amman. My mother always sends them for me. ... I bring stories ...different kinds... I use the weekend specifically for Arabic... you know all week they learn English. Arabic is just once a week, because I don't want them to have too much to do during the week*

Dina demonstrates the least amount of concern for her children's native language learning. Her children speak a mixture of English and Arabic at home. She says she does try to teach her children the letters of the alphabet. She speaks to them in Arabic at home, but she also speaks English sometimes. She says they will learn English at school. But she wants them to be able to speak Arabic so that when they go home even if it is just for a visit, they can interact with people. Again here one can see the feeling of returning home as a factor to language maintenance, as seen in the following quote by Dina:

*I speak to them in Arabic because I know when they go to English school they will immediately learn English and be able to speak better than us. ... so when we go home even if it is for a visit they need to know how to speak to other children and play with them, because as you know children in our country don't speak much English.*

She is aware of the problem of native language maintenance in the United States. Thus she tries to teach her children the native language.

In conclusion the home plays an important role in language maintenance. The use of native language at the home is a significant indicator that language is being maintained. While at the same time the decision not to speak the native language at home is a main factor in language death (Fuller, 1982). Fortunately as we saw in this study the Arab-Americans have decided to use and stress the use of native language at home. Randa says she constantly reminds her children to speak in Arabic. And Fatima says when they ask for anything using English they don't get what they want. This confirms with Jiyad (1996) that parents' efforts to maintain the native language is very important. Children whose parents are involved in their schooling do better than students whose parents are less involved (Stevenson and Baker, 1987; Goldenberg, 1987).

The mothers are quite involved in their children's education of Arabic literacy. They highly value the Arabic language and feel that their children should learn it. And that is why they have gone through tough measures to ensure literacy of Arabic for their children. Parent involvement has a positive effect on children's performance (Nieto, 1996). These mothers have very high expectations of their children. They expect them to attend college or the university.

These mothers demonstrate a very strong feeling toward maintaining the native language. They all have worked towards fulfilling this goal. The children in this study participate in all activities held by the Muslim community. They attend dinner gatherings at the Mosque, they go to the Friday prayer, they celebrate the two Muslim holidays...etc. They are part of a community, which they relate to and work towards building and making it strong. Communication is a key factor in children's success (Nieto, 1996).

### **Classroom Teaching**

At the school where data was collected for this paper, the curriculum included one textbook only. The teachers were more interested in covering the materials during the school year rather than caring about the actual materials being taught, as seen by the quote by Muna:

*We have to finish the book by the end of the term. The principal says the parents will complain if we don't finish the textbook.*

Good pedagogy in the classroom seemed to be lacking. By pedagogy the researcher means techniques or strategies that teachers use to make learning more fun or interesting, as well as how the teacher perceives the nature of learning and what she does to create conditions that motivate students to learn and to become critical thinkers (Nieto, 1996).

In the grammar class the teacher adopted the form of a lecture. She discussed the lesson exactly as it is written in the textbook. The examples she used are taken directly from the book. And she usually ended the class by doing problem solving. Each student read a sentence for example pointing out the nouns or verbs depending on the subject matter of the day. And when the students couldn't find the correct answer she asked another student to do it, or sometimes she would answer it herself. In this class the children showed total lack of interest. The researcher noted that the children usually yawned, moved around in their seats, or read the mosque's newspaper, or played with the basketball. It is evident that the children are not interested in learning abstract grammar at least not in the form that it was being presented in this particular classroom. The students have all conveyed to us that they don't like grammar. For example in response to my question: " Do you think you should or need to learn a Grammar?" Rawan answered with the following: "NO, I would rather much be doing handwriting, conversation. Like maybe colloquial not necessarily like the real Arabs (standard). I would rather know what the word meant rather than what it is ... a verb or a noun". And in response to the question : would you rather not go to the school at all?" Rawan answered by saying:" Well No, I get to see my friends and we talk before and after the class so that I think it is useful"

As for the reading section the method used by the teacher is that of a traditional one. The goal of this section is to get the students to be fluent in reading and actually understand what they read. Yet the strategy that Mrs. Muna follows is that she reads the lesson from the text. She then asks students in a round robin fashion to each read a couple of sentences. Then she starts to read each sentence and explain it while the students passively listen. When asked about this issue the teachers explained that they lack the

resources to be creative and to produce a good curriculum. In addition they were limited to a time frame and didn't have the flexibility of altering the curriculum.

*Dina: Even if I wanted to change the curriculum I need resources to help me do so. You know I can't do it on my own. And the library in the mosque doesn't help at all. We are in America I can't just walk to the library and pick up the books I need for my class. We barely have books at home.*

Thus we see that there is a great mismatch between the curriculum and the needs of the student. There is a mismatch between the curriculum and the students' lives, their community and their families (Nieto, 1996; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Nieto (1996) explains that the school curriculum and real life are often at polar extremes. The curriculum needs to touch the lives of these particular students living in the United States. Taking the Saudi text, which is designed for Saudi students may not be a very good idea. The book is designed for the Saudi child, it does not make any reference to the Arab children in the United States. We should not forget that although these children have Arabic culture at home they also have American culture from school and friends. In order for these children to understand the actual word they need to understand the world behind the word (Freire & Macedo, 1987). "Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language rather it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

The teachers have said that the curriculum is not what those children need. But that the school requires them to teach grammar, as seen by the following quote from the interview with Dina:

*No I don't care for them to know grammar... yes we teach it at school but many of the parents oppose it... I even tell Mr. Haamid that we really don't need to teach them too detailed grammar. It is too abstract... yes I teach it because it is in the curriculum. And I have to follow it.. But I don't prefer it.*

She also says that what the principal says she has to follow and since there aren't any resources to help her create her own curriculum she will do what they ask for. It seems that school is incorporating the classical

approach to teaching or what Freire & Macedo, (1987) call the Academic approach to reading. Despite the negative attitude towards the school the parents still send their children and pay tuition, on the assumption that the school does influence language maintenance even if the curriculum is at odds with the students needs.

The Arab community is so interested in maintaining the Arabic language that they have established an Arabic literacy school in addition to the Quraanic (Islamic) school, which teaches Quran and Islamic culture. But unfortunately through the observations and through the interviews the study shows that this school does very little to enhance the children's literacy skills. The teachers by their own confessions have said that they are not qualified or trained in education to teach these children. They require training in the second language acquisition and second language literacy development. Thus their role is very limited in the classroom, and so this is reflected upon the students in the sense that the pedagogy is not good enough to allow the students to participate. Schools have historically proven to play a very important role in language maintenance(Sawaie & Fishman, 1985; Sawaie, 1992; Fraser, 1973).

The curriculum taught at the school does not accommodate student's needs. It is abstract, linguistic based rather than being reflective of children's everyday lives. Although the school is lacking trained teachers and the use of good methodology and good curriculum it is still a factor in language maintenance for this group of Arab Americans, but not a very effective factor at this stage of the school's development.

The teachers should also have a positive effect on language maintenance, but in this study, the students showed lack of interest in their teachers, they didn't care much about them. Most of the children even felt that the teachers were not interested in teaching and didn't like teaching at all.

Ahmad believes in his heart that Mrs. Dina doesn't like him. And that she intentionally picks on him. This resulted in his not wanting to go to school. But his father who really wants him to learn Arabic forces him to go anyway. Fatime says " I talked to his father about taking him out of the school he doesn't like it and he doesn't like the teacher but his father insisted



that he goes". He didn't go to the school while his father was in Mecca attending the pilgrimage. Again the parents here are aware of the importance of the school for their children's native language literacy. They continue to send them there even if the children don't like it. When asked what she thought about the teacher, Rawan said".. They are okay I really don't care.. I sit and I listen to them". The teachers themselves indicated willingness for change if they are given the chance. The reading teacher expressed that she feels that the school needs more experienced teachers, ones that can teach literacy to the students. Dina is a computer science major with no prior experience of teaching grammar. Muna is a religion teacher, she has two years of teaching experience, but she taught religion to fluent native speakers of Arabic. She has no experience of teaching language literacy to limited native speakers of Arabic, although they know how to speak it, learning it at school is almost as learning a second language. Thus the teachers require training in second language acquisition and second language literacy development.

The methodology in the classroom is a one way street. The teacher is the starting point and the student is the end of the street. This is what Friere calls banking. The teacher deposits the information (Knowledge) into the students who are perceived as empty receptacles (Nieto, 1996). The instruction in both the reading and the grammar classes was of traditional nature. In the reading class the teacher first reads the text then each of the students reads a couple of sentences in the round robin fashion. Then she re-reads the text one sentence at a time then she explains it, pointing out the new or difficult vocabulary. In the grammar classroom, Dina takes the first five minutes to give out and collect homework, and then she starts to explain a certain grammatical feature using the examples from the text. The terminology is abstract and out of context for the students.

The findings of this study suggest that the Arab community in this midwestern town is very interested in maintaining the native language. Maintenance of the language means maintenance of the religion and culture of the Arab world from which they all come. The parents have all gone through great efforts to teach the native language even when the community didn't have a school. And now with the school at hand, parents still do not

rely heavily on the school but rather continue to teach their children on their own.

This study has shown that for this particular Arab-American group maintenance of the native language is very important. And that ethnic identity, religion, parents' roles, the role of the curriculum, teachers' roles, and the attitude towards the Arabic language play major factors in native language maintenance. Language maintenance is crucial to the maintenance of culture. It is through language that culture is transmitted to younger generations. The tie between Arabic as a language and being Arabs is very strong for the people in this study. To them speaking Arabic does entail being Arabs and vice versa, being Arabs entails speaking Arabic (Hornberger, 1988). The findings in this paper can be of considerable use to the Arabs. They can learn about the factors that influence language maintenance and try to enhance them. They can be very useful to families that have just begun their journeys in the United States. They can make use of the experience of the older generation and most importantly they will be aware of the importance of native language literacy for their children.

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