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## Students' Perceptions of Factors Contributing to Enrollment in Arabic Courses at a College Level

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Students' Perceptions of Factors Contributing to Enrollment in Arabic Courses at a College

Level

by

Qays Q. Majeed

A dissertation presented in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
with a concentration in Educational Innovation  
Department of Language, Literacy, Ed.D., Exceptional Education and Physical Education  
College of Education  
University of South Florida

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### **Dedication**

To my wife, whose love, support, encouragement never wavered. Without her, this journey would not have been possible. To my loving son and daughter who have been always a source of strength and inspiration.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this evaluation was to investigate the factors that contribute to students' recruitment and retention in the Arabic program at my college. The two questions guiding this evaluation were: (1) what factors influence students to join the Arabic program at my college and (2) what factors influence students to continue to enroll in subsequent higher-level Arabic courses? To accomplish this evaluation, I conducted interviews with six former students --four women and two men--in the Arabic program. Eight themes emerged following analysis of data. The findings show that students joined the Arabic program for a variety of reasons. Several participants were interested in learning a non-romance language and discovering a different culture. Some were mainly career-oriented people who sought future job opportunities after graduation. Other participants were interested in learning Arabic to enrich their academic area of study while others thought that Arabic was a moderately difficult language to learn. There were other reasons that contributed to student persistence in the program. Many participants shared that they became more interested in the language and culture after completing the elementary course in Arabic. Participants were encouraged by the supportive learning experiences that accompanied their learning of Arabic. They liked the teacher's personality and teaching style. Participants also shared that they wanted to be competent in the language so that they would meet future job requirements. Finally, I approached this investigation through an appreciative inquiry lens, which focused on the strengths and what worked well in the program rather than on the pitfalls and weaknesses.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **My Story of Learning English as a Foreign Language**

Since I want to know why American students want to learn Arabic, I would like to start this study by telling my story of what made me learn English as a foreign language. I was born and raised in Iraq, an Arab country in the Middle East, where most people spoke Arabic, the Iraqi dialect. One time at the age of seven, I accompanied my father to a grocery store and a stranger approached us and asked my father a question in a language I did not understand. My father replied to the man and they continued talking for a few more minutes. Then, the man thanked my father and left. I was looking at them and surprised at how my father was speaking a language that I was not able to understand and we did not use at home. I wished that I knew what they were saying at that moment.

In the fifth grade, I had to start learning English at school, which was a mandatory class in K-12 in Iraq. Just like other students in the school, I found English as a hard language to learn. At that early age, I did not appreciate or find any purpose in learning English. I consistently asked myself, “Why were they teaching us this language which we did not neither used at home nor in school?” This attitude soon disappeared when a close friend of mine introduced his cousin to me who spoke a fluent English as the latter was born and raised in an English-speaking country and was spending the summer with his family in Baghdad, Iraq. He barely spoke Arabic. My close friend and I found it very hard to understand him or maintain a conversation with him. The next day, my friend and I attended the English class with enthusiasm to learn what we can so

that we can speak with our new friend. I started to see value in learning English after that occasion.

As I grew older, I began to understand that English entailed a prominent social status in my community. I used to see how people look up to Mr. Salah, an English language teacher who lived in the neighborhood and many neighbors would send their children to Mr. Salah to teach them English. People, in the area, often referred to his house as the ‘English teacher’ house.

At college, I wanted to specialize in a major that would secure me a job market in the future. That was my main reason for choosing English, which was one of the prominent majors that one would more likely find a job after graduation. It was very disappointing, for example, to see my cousin who specialized in history, was not able to find a job related to history although he obtained a high GPA and finally ended up doing something unrelated to what he studied at college. I was certain that a graduate with an English degree would have more opportunities than many other specializations.

Therefore, many factors influenced my decision to learn English, such as curiosity, desire, social interaction, and employment. My journey to learn English started with curiosity as a child with hearing a different language at a local store, encouraged by a desire to converse in the language with a new friend, supported by my understanding of the social value embedded within English, and more importantly enhanced by realizing its value as a career for the future.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Arabic language has been identified as a critical language by the National Security Education Program (NSEP, n.d; Shiri, 2010). National attention has been given to Arabic following the events of September 11 of 2001. The violent attacks have been associated with Arabs and Muslims who were blamed for the attacks (Abu-Melhim, 2014). There has been a

demand to open new Arabic programs and expand the existing ones across the nation (Al-Batal, 2007). The number of people who were willing to enroll in the Arabic courses has increased, and many Arabic language teachers were hired to cover the severe shortage of qualified teachers. The US government has also encouraged learning Arabic and allocated resources for teaching foreign languages (Berbeco, 2016).

Starting new Arabic programs and expanding other ones resulted in multiple challenges. Among these challenges were the lack of a broad vision for teaching and learning Arabic, the shortage of Arabic teachers who were mainly untrained native speakers of Arabic (Al-Batal, 2007), the unavailability of reliable Arabic textbooks (Abu-Melhim, 2014; Al Busaidi, 2015) and many others. Al-Batal (2007) asserts that there is a need for “comprehensive language policy and national agenda for action” (p. 270). Although today the situation might be better, some of the challenges are still present and may consequently affect enrollment and retention in Arabic programs.

The Modern Language Association (MLA), which specializes in collecting foreign language enrollment data (other than English) for U.S. colleges and universities, declared that there has been a dramatic drop in language enrollment during the last decade. In 2016, MLA recorded the second-largest decline since that of 1972 and concluded that such a drop could be the “beginning of a continuous downward trend” (Looney & Lusin, 2018, p. 9.)

There is a lack of literature investigating student enrollment and retention in Arabic programs. One can barely find qualitative or quantitative studies that explore enrollment trends in Arabic programs (except the MLA surveys). In other words, although low student enrollment and retention in Arabic courses is an important topic to investigate, and Arabic language learning is a high priority for the federal government, it has not been researched thoroughly. Based on

personal experiences and interactions with other Arabic teachers, student enrollment is a problem that negatively impacts many Arabic programs as well as other language programs.

### **The Problem of Practice**

In my workplace, there are many situations when low student enrollment in Arabic courses occurs. No student enrollment might also occur in the advanced level of Arabic. Low enrollment is usually observed at the intermediate level (i.e., 201 and 202) and low or no enrollment at the advanced level (i.e., 301). Students' decisions to enroll in the Arabic program and continue or discontinue the Arabic course sequence offerings is the target of my study.

My institution was not the first place I encountered the low student enrollment problem. I have witnessed this problem at other institutions as well, including small private and large public universities with regional campuses. I am aware that this problem exists in other language programs across the United States. Although the Arabic language has been given national attention lately (Al-Batal, 2007; Abu-Melhim, 2014; Shiri, 2010), students may choose to avoid enrolling in Arabic courses or give up continuing the sequence of language Course offerings. Why does this problem occur? What factors influencing students' decisions to enroll in Arabic courses at small colleges? What motivates them to persist in learning Arabic and continue in the program? These questions are the focus of my study. I want to investigate the enrollment problem within my institution.

### **Study Questions**

The evaluation will attempt to answer the following questions:

Q1. What factors influence students to join the Arabic program at my college?

Q2. What factors influence students to continue to enroll in subsequent higher-level Arabic courses?

## **Purpose and Significance of Study**

This evaluation will address a problem that negatively affects the Arabic program at my institution. The purpose of this study is to examine the contextual factors, causal elements, and reasons that contribute to the existence of low enrollment in Arabic courses. The significance of this study is to help the investigator understand the problem and gaining knowledge about its causes. Hopefully, interventions are proposed in the future in the light of the findings. I assume that many causes interplay and lead to this problem. Therefore, I believe that solving this problem will not only increase student enrollment but also improve students' learning and outcomes (i.e., solving this problem would require many interventions that would consequently impact students' performance positively). The findings of the study are not meant to be generalized.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Research studies on foreign language learning indicate that there is a relationship between learning a foreign language and certain items such as motivation, orientations (Gardner & Tremblay 1994; Husseinali, 2006), beliefs, expectancies (Al Alili & Hassan, 2017), teacher, and classroom climate (Aladdin, 2013, 2014). In this study, student enrollment may also be affected by multiple elements: student-related factors such as attitudes, expectancies, and beliefs, teacher-related factors such as teaching style and personality, subject-related factors such as language uniqueness (Aladdin, 2013 ), college-related factors such as mentoring, and program-related factors, such as curriculum (Dajani et al., 2014 ). Students who choose to study Arabic are usually initially motivated by instrumental, integrative, intellectual, or identification orientations (For detail, see the literature review chapter) (Husseinali, 2006). Students' decisions to continue or discontinue learning Arabic are influenced by the above elements as well.

## **Methodology**

This evaluation utilized in-depth interviews for data collection. This approach was a good fit for the evaluation purpose: investigating low student enrollment in Arabic courses at my workplace. I was not after numbers or frequencies; on the contrary, I was after in-depth explanations, details, and reasons for students' enrollment decisions. I wanted to investigate a particular problem (low student enrollment) in a specific context (my workplace). I aimed to dig deep into this problem, analyze and understand its causes and contextual factors. I believe that the qualitative approach best suited my study.

I interviewed six former students who enrolled in the Arabic language courses during the years of 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020. I chose six because I wanted to obtain a sufficiently large data set to assure that it includes various perspectives from different participants in order to identify patterns and themes. On the other hand, since I did not see a gender issue in current enrollment patterns, my participants were males and females. Participants were native speakers of English and full-time students who sought to obtain a Bachelor's degree in any majors and minors at the institution. Students participated in the study regardless of gender, academic major, ethnicity, or linguistic background.

## **Background and Role of Evaluator**

I am a native speaker of Arabic, coming from an Arab origin and very knowledgeable about the Arab culture with all its complexities and uniqueness. Arabic is my first language, which I enjoy speaking and teaching. It is a beautiful language and unique. I taught Arabic in several institutions including small private and large public universities with regional campuses. I have been teaching Arabic for more than 10 years in the United States. I have good expertise and knowledge in my field.

I have a passion for teaching. I am fortunate to be able to have a job that combines both my passion for teaching and love for Arabic into a career. Although I always get good student evaluations from students who show interest in my classes and respect to my character, students may choose not to enroll in Arabic courses or discontinue learning Arabic. I wanted to investigate low student enrollment in Arabic courses to find answers to my questions and understand why students learn Arabic at my institution.

### **The Setting**

I teach at a liberal art college in the U.S. The college offers undergraduate programs that lead to Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Arts, and Bachelor of Fine Arts. The total undergraduate enrollment does not usually exceed 2000 students. Some of the popular majors offered include anthropology, biological sciences, social sciences, psychology, international business, creative writing, music, literature, English, and Spanish. Like many U.S. colleges, there are sports facilities, an outstanding library, classrooms, offices, and laboratories on the college campus. There are also facilities designed for art exhibits, theatrical and musical productions, and athletic events.

Students are usually between 18-22 years old. They come from different states across the country to study at this college. On-campus, classes are small with a 25-seat capacity allowing students to enjoy an excellent learning environment. Mentors guide students throughout the years of the study and assist them with consultations and recommendations. Students are encouraged to engage in multiple activities on campus and to be creative. For example, there are cultural clubs, a weekly newspaper, a radio station, and sports teams. Study abroad programs provide students with an international experience, which helps them to enhance their learning and see other cultures and peoples.



There are several language programs on campus such as Spanish, French, and Arabic. Spanish usually attracts the highest number of students among other language programs on campus. All language programs offer at least minors. The college requires students to take two semesters (or the equivalent) of a foreign language as a requirement for graduation.

The Arabic program offers five courses in Arabic including elementary level (i.e., AB 101 and AB 102), intermediate level (i.e., AB 201 and AB 202) and advanced level (i.e., AB 301). The sequence of the five courses adapt the following textbooks: Alif Baa: Introduction to Arabic Letters and Sounds (Brustad, Al-Batal, & Al-Tonsi, 2010) Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-Arabiyya (Part One) and (Part Two) prepared by Kristen Brustad, Mahmoud Al-Batal, and Abbas Al-Tonsi (Brustad, Al-Batal, & Al-Tonsi, 2013). Additional materials are included in each course and may vary from year to year. The courses focus on developing skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening comprehension. In classes, the emphasis is placed on vocabulary, grammatical structures, communication skills, authentic texts, examining the Arabic culture (e.g., customs, traditions, family, cuisine, occasions, etc.), and the like. Students are required to do drills for homework, work in groups in the classroom, and take tests, including a midterm and final exam.

### **Definition of terms**

***Low Enrollment:*** low number of students enrolled in a given class. At my institution, the capacity for each Arabic class is 25 students. Low enrollment is a relative term whose definition may differ from teacher to another and from a language level to another. For this study, I define low enrollment in accordance with the course level in the sequence:

***Elementary level*** (i.e., Arabic 101 and 102), low enrollment for Arabic 101 is less than 15 students whereas for Arabic 102 is less than 10.

*Intermediate level* (i.e., Arabic 201 and 202), low enrollment for Arabic 201 is less than eight students whereas for Arabic 202 is less than five.

*Advanced Level* (i.e., Arabic 301), low enrollment is less than three students.

*Arabic 101, 102, 201, 202, and 301:* At my institution, Arabic 101 is the first course in the sequence of a total of five courses, Arabic 102 is the second course, Arabic 201 is the third course, Arabic 202 is the fourth course, and Arabic 301 is the fifth one.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Student Enrollment in Foreign Languages**

Enrollment in Foreign Language courses has dramatically increased during the last few decades. President Carter's Commission on Foreign language and International studies as well as multiple education reports emphasized the importance of teaching and learning foreign languages in the United States (Lafleur, 1992). The events of September 11 awakened the curiosity of Americans to learn foreign languages, such as Arabic, hoping to better understand other nations and to cope up with prospective problems and challenges. The Arabic language was designated as a "critical need language" (Shiri, 2010, p. 216) and the U.S. government emphasized the importance of learning Arabic for its national security. Federal funding drastically increased (Al-Batal, 2007; Morrison, 2003) and resources were allocated to design textbooks in Arabic to military and intelligence personnel (Shiri, 2010). Arabic programs in the U.S. colleges and universities and study-abroad opportunities rapidly increased (Abdalla & Al-Batal, 2012). Although enrollment in the Arabic programs has grown rapidly, two things, according to Brosh (2013), have to remain in mind. First, the total number of enrollees in Arabic programs/courses is small. Second, the number of hours dedicated to study Arabic (3-4 hours a week) cannot help learners reach a high level of competency/fluency. Brosh (2013) suggests that learning Arabic should start in high school while college/university can be the place where students build on what they know and develop their Arabic proficiency. Many researchers (i.e., Hayward, 2000; Lambert, 1999; Panetta, 1999) agree that there is a lack of interest of American

college students to pursue learning foreign languages to proficiency. They choose to stop learning before becoming fluent in that language.

The Modern Language Association (MLA), in a preliminary report published in 2018, argues that there is a drop in most of the language enrollment (e.g., Arabic) between fall 2013 and fall 2016, recording the second-largest decline in its recoding history after the drop of 1972 (Looney & Lusin, 2018). The MLA believed that the drop was not merely a blip, thought it might also be the “beginning of a continuous downward trend” (p. 9.) The MLA stated that Spanish was still the highest commonly taught language in the United States. French came second, American Sign Language third, German fourth, Japanese fifth, Italian sixth, Chinese seventh, Arabic eighth, Latin ninth, Russian tenth, Korean eleventh, Greek twelfth, Portuguese thirteenth, Hebrew fourteenth, and other languages fifteenth. The report also indicated that all languages, except Japanese and Korean, witnessed a drop in enrollment compared to 2013. Appendix A, Table A1 contains statistics (numbers) of the report findings.

### **Challenges Facing Arabic programs in the United States**

The national attention given to Arabic, which has taken the form of allocating budget and governmental support, resulted in expanding the Arabic programs across the nation; new programs have been started, and established programs grew. Ironically, the growth of Arabic programs and the increase of interested people in learning Arabic brought up several unexpected challenges to the Arabic field (Abdalla & Al-Batal, 2012; Al-Batal, 2007; Busaidi, 2015). There were no preparations, plans, or visioning to manage this new situation.

Native speakers of Arabic were needed to fill in numerous vacant teaching positions. Today 73% of Arabic teachers in the United States are native speakers of Arabic (Abdalla & Al-Batal, 2012). Although these teaching positions have been excellent job opportunities for native

speakers of Arabic, the majority of the individuals hired were not trained and had no expertise in education or teaching Arabic (Abdalla & Al-Batal, 2012; Al-Batal, 2007). Being a native speaker of Arabic is not equivalent to being a qualified teacher of Arabic. There was a huge need for training programs and workshops. A survey of 209 college teachers of Arabic by Abdalla and Al-Batal (2012) indicated that most Arabic teachers have not been trained in language pedagogy. Therefore, filling teaching positions with untrained native speakers can negatively affect students' learning and enrollment as well.

Arabic courses attract a small number—approximately 12.8%—of American enrollees in the advanced levels of language courses compared to other foreign languages (Shiri, 2010). Additionally, many Americans have difficulty attaining professional-level proficiency in speaking Arabic (Abdalla & Al-Batal, 2012; Brosh, 2013), which can further challenge enrollment in Arabic courses. This concern has been discussed in the literature; Husseinali (2006) states that Arabic is commonly perceived as a difficult language to learn, which causes many students to not enroll or drop classes. Husseinali (2006) suggests “In order to improve retention rates of those who are taking [Less commonly taught languages] classes, we need to understand their specific needs and then address those needs. Satisfying learner needs can lead to higher motivation as learners see their needs being fulfilled” (p. 398).

Finally, there is a dearth of Arabic graduate programs and an urgent need for comprehensive teaching programs across the United States (Al-Batal, 2007) as well as an expansion of training opportunities for Arabic teachers (Abdalla & Al-Batal, 2012).

## **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

### ***Conceptual Framework***

Research studies on foreign language learning, as mentioned in chapter one, indicate that there is a relationship between learning a foreign language and motivation, orientations (Gardner & Tremblay 1994; Husseinali, 2006), beliefs, expectancies (Al Alili & Hassan, 2017), teacher, and classroom climate (Aladdin, 2013, 2014). Students who choose to study Arabic are usually initially motivated by instrumental, integrative, intellectual, or identification orientations (Husseinali, 2006). Students' decisions to continue or discontinue learning Arabic are influenced by student-related factors, teacher-related factors, subject-related factors (Aladdin, 2013), college-related factors, and program-related factors (Dajani et al., 2014).

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a theory, practice of inquiry (Stavros et al., 2016) and a philosophy (Priest et al., 2013). AI is a search for the best in people and their organizations, which “involves systematic discovery of what gives “life” to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 3). Unlike the traditional problem-solving approach that focuses on weaknesses, pitfalls, and drawbacks, Appreciative Inquiry focuses on strengths, assets, and successful experiences (Fifolt & Lander, 2013; Grant & Humphries, 2006; Lee et al., 2011). AI attempts to look for what works well and what makes people perform at their peak in the organization (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Hammond, 1998; Kung et al., 2013). Instead of asking questions like *What is not working?* AI would ask *What is working well?* (Collington & Fook, 2016). Appreciative Questions encourage people to share their best experiences, successes, and strengths and create a positive environment among employees (Evans, 2012). The AI

process engages all: a discovery phase, a dream phase, a design phase, and a destiny phase (Mackdonald, 2020; Lewis & Van Tiem, 2004).

Appreciative Inquiry draws from positive psychology (Lee et al., 2011). Positive emotions influence human psychology positively (Mishra & Bhatnagar, 2012) and help organizations to generate positive images of the future they want to see in their workplace (Fredrickson, 2003). People are more likely to excel when they are engaged in a positive environment and when the focus is directed to enhance strengths and opportunities instead of dealing with weaknesses and pitfalls (Lee et al., 2011).

### ***Theoretical Underpinnings of AI***

Five principles are embedded in the AI philosophy: Constructionist, Simultaneity, Poetic, Anticipatory, and Positive (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

***Constructionist.*** This principle emphasizes that organizations are human constructions (Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015), which are influenced by people's thoughts, practices, and actions. People (e.g., employees) create meaning (Fifolt & Lander, 2013) and construct their realities through language (Mishra & Bhatnagar, 2012). The way people act and approach change would be influenced by their social discourse (Fifolt, & Lander, 2013). People's interactions and conversations affect their future actions (Macpherson, A. 2015). In summary, words create reality and that affects how people approach change.

***Simultaneity.*** The questions we ask and the change we make are not separable, but simultaneous (Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015). Asking question initiates change (Fifolt & Lander, 2013). A positive Change begins when good, appreciative questions are asked (Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015). Questions trigger ideas and thoughts (Fifolt & Lander, 2013) and often draw answers (e.g., stories). Appreciative questions lead to data full of positive experiences, strengths,

and successful practices through which plans are made and interventions are implemented (Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015).

**Poetic.** Human organizations are like an open book, which is constantly coauthored by participants just like a good piece of poetry, which can go through endless times of interpretations (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). According to AI, when people share their positive experiences and interpret their stories, they develop new understandings and appreciation of what works in their workplace. The kind of questions asked to participants lead the direction of the inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Appreciative questions generate positive stories, which facilitate change.

**Anticipatory.** A collective understanding of the present (Stavros et al., 2016) and collective imagination about the future generate organizational change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). People act according to their anticipation of the future, and that influences their behaviors and practices (Stavros et al. 2016). Positive images of the future largely influence present-day behaviors (Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015).

**Positive.** This principle is key in the appreciative inquiry philosophy and embedded in the other four principles (Stavros et al., 2016). The positive questions lead to positive stories filled up with positive images of the future (Cooperrider, 1999). The positive approach of the AI facilitate change to occur through the dominance of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2003) on all phases in the AI process.

### ***The 4 phases of the AI process***

There are four steps in the appreciative inquiry process, which is often referred to as the 4-D cycle: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Steyn, 2009;



Zakariassen & Victoroff, 2013). Some authors, such as Macpherson (2015), add another step that precedes the 4-D stages--“Definition” ---which refers to identifying an area of investigation.

**Discovery.** After identifying an area of investigation, the discovery phase comes. Discovery begins by asking positive questions and initiating conversations in the workplace. The questions asked affect the quality of the outcomes (Macpherson, 2015). If the questions were positive, the outcomes would more likely to come out positive. In AI, questions focus on the strengths and positive experiences of others (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Therefore, information obtained always contains stories of successes, achievements, and assets, which create a supportive environment for change (Stavros et al., 2016). This step can be conducted through interviews or focus groups, which helps investigators to discover what works well in the organization and what gives life to it. It also helps people to identify the root causes of success and leads to knowing the positive factors in the organization (Macpherson, 2015). This happens through engaging people in conversations and encouraging them to share their attitudes, thoughts, and best practices in their workplaces. This phase aims to discover themes (positive core) upon which the other phases are built (Macpherson, 2015).

**Dream.** The dream phase builds on its phase one discoveries (e.g., positive core: themes) (Macpherson, 2015). In the dream phase, people express their visions towards the future they want to see based on the discovery phase (Chen, 2003). They share images of the desired future in regards to their workplace including dreams, hopes, and expectations (San Martin & Calabrese, 2011). Sharing dreams can be through “presentations, gallery displays, performance, imaginative journeys, and beyond” (Macpherson, 2015, p. 11). This phase helps the creation of a vision for the future (Watkinson & Mohr, 2001) which is the foundation for the next phase: Design.

***Design.*** A plan is formulated based on the dream phase (Lewis & Van Tiem, 2004). In this phase, participants create design activities (Fifolt & Lander, 2013) and contribute to building a new system, built on the strengths of what works well in the organization (Lewis & Van Tiem, 2004).

***Destiny.*** The participants implement the plan (e.g., vision) made earlier (Fifolt & Lander, 2013). The destiny phase is “an ongoing and never truly ends” (Fifolt & Lander, 2013, p. 12). In other words, by the end of this phase, the cycle of AI begins a new, and it is the way to sustain positive change in the workplace (Fifolt & Lander, 2013).

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Orientations and Motivations in learning Arabic***

According to Gardner and Tremblay (1994), orientation is the reason for studying a foreign language while motivation involves both effort and desire to achieve the goals of learning the language. In this light, orientation is an initial motivation to do something and knowing students’ orientation to learn Arabic is of great value for Arabic educators, textbook authors, and program coordinators (Husseinali, 2006). On the other hand, motivated students are more likely to enroll, study, and continue than those who are not. No one would spend time, energy, and money for no reason, especially when it comes to learning a language, which is an arduous process that typically requires patience, persistence, dedication, and practice. A motivated language learner not only exerts effort to learn a target language but also aspires and enjoys learning it (Awad, 2014). Arabic is considered a difficult language to learn--especially for Americans who may find Spanish or French much easier. So, what motivates Americans to study Arabic?

According to literature, several orientations spur college-level Americans to learn Arabic. The literature distinguishes between two groups of Arabic learners who form the population of enrollees: heritage learners and non-heritage learners. There seems to be a consensus among researchers that these two groups differ in their orientation to learn Arabic. Heritage learners have an Arab and/or Muslim heritage (e.g., cultural, religious, historical background) while the non-heritage learners are those who do not have any heritage ties to Arabs and/or Islam (Husseinali, 2006). Additionally, heritage learners can be subdivided into two groups: Arabic speaking group (i.e., Arabic HLLs) and non-Arabic speaking Muslims (i.e., Muslim HLLs) (Husseinali, 2012).

While both heritage and non-heritage groups share similar motivating orientations to enroll in Arabic programs, they differ in other orientations related to identification and integrative purposes. Heritage learners are usually more motivated to learn Arabic for identification/integrative orientations as they often identify themselves with Arabs and/or Muslims (Husseinali, 2006). However, both groups want to learn Arabic in order to “converse with native speakers in Arabic,” “learn a world culture,” “understand politics in the Middle East,” “travel to Arab countries,” and “[understand] the importance of Arabic in the world economy” (Husseinali, 2012, p. 400).

Heritage learners (e.g., Arab-Americans and/or Muslim-Americans) form a significant percentage of enrollees in Arabic programs. More importantly, they are often motivated learners who are more likely to continue beyond minimum language requirements. Arabic HLLs highly value the identification orientation; they see a value in learning Arabic for self-identification with Arabs (Husseinali, 2012). This group of students does not seem to rely on the instrumental orientations (e.g., learning Arabic for job purposes), as their instrumental motivation is weak.

Muslim HLLs, on the other hand, are more motivated to expand their knowledge of Islam and to enhance their religious identity by studying Arabic, which is the language of the Muslim Holy Book: *The Quran*.

Arab-American communities usually maintain strong ties to their original cultures and maintain their own values, beliefs, and traditions (Seymour-Jorn 2004). They stay in contact with their extended families overseas. Learning Arabic-- especially for the young generation-- is highly encouraged by parents and the community (Seymour-Jorn 2004). Parents see that studying Arabic as a “tool to help their children not only preserve their cultural background, but also maintain their religious identity, conform to the larger Arab society, and prepare them for the national and international job market” (Al Alili and Hasan, 2017, p. 24). There is a positive relationship between parents’ supportive attitudes and students’ learning process. Many Arab parents feel that they are responsible for urging their children to learn Arabic so that they can read the *Quran* in Arabic (Seymour-Jorn 2004). Al Alili and Hasan (2017) encourage future research to investigate non-Arabic speaking parents’ attitudes regarding learning Arabic as a foreign language. Some researchers have found that students’ motivations to learn Arabic are strongly linked to integrative orientation (i.e., related to an interest in politics, religion, culture, and people; McPhee & O’Brien, 2014). In this sense, some students want to learn Arabic to know more about the Middle Eastern and North African regions. McPhee and O’Brien’s (2014) research indicates that only 20% of participants were motivated by an instrumental orientation; students’ motivation was mainly “cultural, travel, [and a] desire to learn a new language” (P. 25). Anderson and Suleiman (2009) found that most students learn Arabic to understand Arab politics and religion better and to prepare to visit an Arab country in the future; Anderson and Suleiman also note that language-learning motivations can evolve or change.

Both heritage and non-heritage language speakers agree on the significance of the instrumental orientation (Husseianali, 2006) and its influence on students' decisions to learn Arabic. Non-heritage learners may seem to care about this orientation more than the heritage ones. In a Malaysian context, Aladdin (2017) found that non-Muslim Malaysian students cared about the instrumental orientation more than Muslim students did since the earlier had neither a cultural affiliation nor a religious connection to Arabs and Islam.

### ***Factors Influencing Students to Study Arabic***

Learning a foreign/second language can be a long, exhausting process and is often influenced by multiple factors. Effective learning happens when good language programs are available, experienced and trained teachers abound, and enthusiastic learners enroll (Al Alili & Hassan, 2017). There are overlapping factors, which contribute to the effectiveness of learning another language, such as the teacher's expertise in the subject matter, the degree to which a program can meet a student's educational needs, and the quality of the learning resources (Dajani, Mubaideen, & Omari, 2014). However, these factors do not operate separately; they have to function in concert for the desired results to be achieved.

Researchers seem to agree on some ideas, including the belief that a good language teacher is essential in the learning process, and that not every native speaker of a language can be a good teacher of that language (Al Alili & Hassan, 2017; Dajani et al., 2014). Dajani et al. (2014) dismiss the belief that all competent speakers of a language are equipped to be skilled educators of the language, particularly when teaching individuals learning a foreign language. In addition to expertise and domain knowledge, a good language teacher usually needs to possess skills known to be associated with effective teachers of any subject, including showing patience, care, consistency, support for learners, and the ability to create a dynamic and engaging

classroom (Awad, 2014). A teacher's personality has also been found to be more critical than the teacher's style of teaching in promoting effective instruction (Aladdin, 2014). In sum, efficiency in teaching the subject matter, preparation, organization, activity planning, effectiveness, knowing students' needs, patience, flexibility, enthusiasm, confidence, and honesty are characteristics of good language teachers. Adding to the importance of a good language teacher, an engaging classroom plays an essential role in improving students' outcomes and increasing enrollment. Engaging activities are motivating elements that influence students' intentions to continue learning Arabic (Awad, 2014).

The quality of learners affects enrollment as well. Serious and motivated learners are more likely to learn faster and exert more effort than those who are not as motivated or serious about their learning. Some students enroll in language classes merely to satisfy college language requirements but have no intention to continue beyond these compulsory requirements. Serious learners are more willing to engage in new learning experiences and try to benefit from what they learn (Dajani et al., 2014). Fortunately, students' negative beliefs and attitudes are changeable. For instance, Rashed (2013) investigated the evolution of interest and beliefs for three non-native speakers who participated in a four months' program abroad in the United Arab Emirates. He found that, for two of the three participants, negative beliefs were changed to positive ones (e.g., Arabic is not too hard to learn). For example, before joining the program, one of the participants thought, "It is too hard to learn Arabic," (p. 55) as he had thought that Arabic script was too difficult to understand. However, after finishing the program, he changed his attitude to "Arabic is an easy language to learn," (p. 55) as he was able to develop some basic skills in Arabic in a short time.

Having a good language program can both help students learn and increase enrollment. An effective program has a curriculum that meets students' needs (Dajani et al., 2014). Setting out clear goals for the program and having qualified teachers who are able to identify students' needs and work to meet students' expectations are essential in a language program. Additionally, having a language laboratory where students have the opportunity to improve some specific linguistic skills is also essential.

On the other hand, motivation to learn a language may be lost at any point in the learning process. Aladdin (2013) investigated the demotivating factors in the Arabic classroom for her Malaysian students who were learning Arabic as a foreign language. She identified nine demotivational factors, including “(1) subject-related factors; (2) teacher-related factors; (3) class-related factors; (4) negative attitudes towards the FL; (5) course materials and learning content; (6) the compulsory nature of the Arabic course; (7) time constraints; (8) lack of opportunities to communicate in Arabic; [and] (9) lack of ability” (p. 1652). Although the context of Aladdin's study (2013) is the Malaysian context, many of these factors apply to other contexts.

### ***Pedagogical and Linguistic Factors in Learning Arabic***

Arabic has a system of writing that is quite different from the English language. It also maintains some features that are unique to other languages. Many researchers, such as Al-Busaidi (2015), argue that it is too difficult for foreign learners of Arabic to reach a linguistic competency equivalent to that of an educated native speaker of Arabic. Non-native speakers encounter several orthographic, morphological, textual, grammatical (McPhee & O'Brien, 2014), linguistic, and pedagogical (Al-Busaidi, 2015) challenges during their journey of learning

Arabic. Such challenges, including diglossia, Arabic Orthography, morphology system, and curriculum and textbooks, are discussed below.

*Diglossia* is the presence of a high standard (e.g., formal register) and low standard (e.g., colloquial register) in a language (Harris & Hodges, 1981). Although Arabic is not unique in this feature, there is still a significant difference between these two forms. Additionally, there is a variety of spoken Arabic dialects (e.g., Egyptian, Levantine, Iraqi, etc.), which constitutes another challenge to teachers and learners of Arabic (Al-Busaidi, 2015). Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), also called classic Arabic, is the written form of Arabic, which is the highly respected register of the language. Modern Standard Arabic is the language of books, newspapers, and TV news. Arabic Writers (e.g., novelists, poets, dramatists) produce their literary works in MSA whether the writer is from Morocco (the west of the Arab world) or Iraq (the east of the Arab world). However, Modern Standard Arabic is rarely used in informal situations.

On the other hand, informal Arabic (also called colloquial dialects) is the spoken register that people use in everyday communication. There are 29 Arab countries and each country has its own dialect, which can be difficult to understand to even Arabs (Brustad et al., 2010). For many occasions, it is difficult for a person from Morocco, for instance, to understand a person from Iraq and vice versa, since each dialect is quite different from the other (McPhee & O'Brien, 2014). There is what is called Educated Spoken Arabic, which is neither too formal nor too informal that is used on TV meetings and Media. Therefore, there have been many arguments about what register of Arabic should be taught in U.S. colleges for American students (Al-Busaidi, 2015).



Modern Standard Arabic has been widely taught throughout the United States. Proponents argue that MSA is what American students need to learn since it is the formal version of Arabic and the language of books. However, when students finish the sequence of Arabic program courses, they often do not feel competent to communicate in Arabic with native speakers because what they have learned in the classroom is different from what native speakers speak (Al-Busaidi, 2015). Such situations cause frustration to learners of Arabic as may feel embarrassed for not being able to converse in Arabic. Some researchers argue that teaching spoken Arabic is the solution; however, this cannot be a practical idea since students need to learn MSA so that they can read and write.

Textbooks incorporating MSA and spoken Arabic were prepared recently and meant to solve this problem. Writers who prepared such textbooks have intended for both written and spoken Arabic to be taught simultaneously. They argue that this approach will help students reach linguistic proficiency in speaking and writing Arabic and develop competency in each (Al-Busaidi, 2015). Although this approach seems to be a good plan to follow, it can still be a challenge for many Arabic instructors to teach both registers simultaneously and can be confusing to foreign learners.

*Arabic Orthography* is another challenging factor for learners of Arabic. The Arabic language has a writing system that is quite different from English, written from right to left. Arabic books, magazines, newspapers are opened in the opposite direction of English books. There are 28 consonants and 14 symbols (i.e., three short vowels, pronunciation markers, grammatical ending, spelling variants, and a “Hamza” consonant). Although Arabic is a phonetic language, which means that words are spelled exactly as they are pronounced, each Arabic letter has three different shapes (i.e., initial, medial, and final) depending on its position in the word.

Also, Arabic can be confusing to non-native speakers because many letters have emphatic counterparts, which can be hard to distinguish by non-native speakers, especially given that there are a variety of dialects in Arabic. For example, ط (T) is the emphatic counterpart for ت (t), ح (H) for ه (h), and ص (S) for س (s) (Brustad, et al., 2010).

Arabic letters by themselves, when they are not connected, constitute no words and thus mean nothing. To make meaningful words, letters need to connect. However, some letters in Arabic do not allow connection such as ا، د، ذ، ر، ز، و، ي. Therefore, students need to memorize them to avoid making spelling mistakes. Additionally, some Arabic letters consist of dots. For instance, (ف f) has one dot above the letter, (ت t) has two dots above the letter, (يا ي) has two dots below the letter, while (ش sh) has three dots above the letter.

Long vowels and short vowels may also be confusing to new learners of Arabic. Many learners of Arabic fail to recognize the difference between long and short vowels until they have sufficient training. There are also diacritic marks such as “shadda” whose absence changes the meanings of words; “sukun,” which indicates the absence of a vowel, as well as “tinween,” and “Taa marbuta,” which function differently.

**Morphology system** (root and patterns system) is another challenging factor in the acquisition of Arabic. Every word in Arabic stems from a three-letter root. Every group of words keeps the order of the root sequence and shares a core meaning that is implicitly incorporated in the root. For example, the root k-t-b (he wrote) is the basis for other relevant words such as maktaba (library), maktab (office), and katib (writer) (Mcphee & O'Brien, 2014) Applying patterns to a root creates new words that carry different meanings. Therefore, roots and patterns are a substantial system in the Arabic language.

***Curriculum and textbooks.*** Many Arabic language programs may not have clearly articulated objectives to achieve (Abboud, 1995), which can negatively affect students' learning and progression in sequential language courses. There is also a shortage of Arabic course materials and resources. Compared to English, there are very few Arabic textbooks for non-native speakers. There is also a need to incorporate cultural materials in the curriculum so that students have the opportunity to understand or expand their understanding of Arab politics, history, and religion (Al-Busaidi, 2015).

### **Critical Foreign Languages**

'Critical foreign languages' is a term designated to those languages that reserve vital importance for the U.S. national security (Hoecherl-Alden, 2016) such as Arabic, Chinese, Persian, Hindi, and Turkish (Egnatz, 2016). The Arabic language, for example, has been given national attention after the events of 9/11 when the US federal government allocated resources for teaching and learning Arabic across the nation. There are many successful programs focused on the critical need languages such as STARTALK, Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), Teletandem, Teachers of Critical Languages Program (TCLP), and Language boot camp (Berbeco, 2016). Such programs are designed to promote foreign language learning in the United States, improve students' proficiency outcomes, and enhance students' linguistic skills.

The STARTALK program, initiated in 2006, is a summer language program at the K-12 grade level. Ten strategically important world languages are offered: Chinese, Arabic, Hindi, Russian, Urdu, Persian, Portuguese, Swahili, Turkish, and Dari. Ellis (2016) explains that the STARTALK program aims to increase the number of American learners to learn critical languages, language teachers to teach critical languages, and foreign language materials. Six principles guide the instruction of all student programs in STARTALK, such as the adoption of

an organized curriculum, facilitation of a learner-centered classroom, use of the target language, integration of culture, use of authentic materials, and keeping assessment throughout the course. Ninety percent of students who have been in the STARTALK program intend to continue learning the same language in the future (Ellis, 2016).

Teachers of Critical Languages Program (TCLP), inaugurated in 2006, is an example of a successful exchange language program. Through the TCLP, Chinese and Egyptian teachers are brought to teach Chinese and Arabic in K-12 schools yearly (Hovhannisyan, 2016). TCLP has been very significant to the international participants and host schools alike; the teachers have the opportunity to develop their English language, get international teaching experience, and improve their teaching skills. Moreover, they return home sharing their experiences with other teachers and apply what they learned in their workplaces. On the other hand, the host schools benefit from hosting such teachers by providing students with the opportunity to learn Arabic/Chinese from native speakers of the language and to get to know the Arabic/Chinese cultures as well (Hovhannisyan, 2016).

At Boston University (BU), there was a shift towards a spoken language curriculum in instruction, which aimed to enhance oral proficiency for BU students in the critical need languages (Hoecherl-Alden, 2016). BU was among the institutions to pursue the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) funding which focuses on oral proficiency and quick pace of language learning. Skill-based courses and technology-assisted practices were adopted in the BU curriculum. Infusion of audiovisual instruction (i.e., authentic-visual material) and incorporation of technology-facilitated student's learning and outcomes (Hoecherl-Alden, 2016).

As far as community colleges are concerned such as Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), the Telelandem program is incorporated (Franklin, 2016). Through this

language program, students from different parts of the world meet online by Skype, OpenMeetings, or Adobe. Franklin (2016) emphasizes that the program enables learners from different countries to teach and learn at the same time from each other and to give immediate feedback to each other on what they are learning. Through such online meetings, authentic conversations are held, learning and teaching for students are happening at the same time, and an engaging environment is created; therefore, the learner autonomy is at its peak (Franklin, 2016).

Many critical need languages are taught in the Defense Language Institute (DLI), which is a military organization that adopts a task-based Language (TBLT) approach. DLI provides unique learning experiences to students with immersion experiences using real-life situations, authentic materials, and by incorporating cultural elements in the tasks (Coakle, 2016). Through the TBLT approach, students use the communicative approach, rely on technology (i.e., iPads, MacBooks, quick network), and learn in small class sizes. Therefore, they reach language proficiency quickly. Furthermore, the DLI curriculum helps students engage critically with class materials with the intention to benefit from the in-class outcomes outside the classroom (Coakle, 2016).

Finally, the Language Boot Camp is another example of a successful language program, which was adopted by the Middlebury Language School. Geisler (2016) indicates that the school keeps a Language pledge that all teachers and students have to follow: students should speak only the target language in and out of the classroom and that all instruction is given only in the target language (Geisler, 2016). This intensive program offers an immersion experience for students. A task-based approach is utilized when students repeat the grammatical structures and vocabulary learned in the classroom in their daily life by constant interactions with others to

reach a mastery level in the language. An authentic language environment in and out of the class is encouraged and technology in instruction is incorporated (Geisler, 2016).

### **My Instructional Practice**

Every language instructor has his/her own teaching philosophy, capabilities, merits, and limitations. Therefore, language classes--even within the same language discipline-- are not exactly the same and may vary depending on how each instructor teaches the language course. To be effective in teaching a language course, I believe that a language instructor should have subject-related knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and personal skills.

I try to create an engaging-learning environment for students in my classrooms. I do that by asking students to work in groups for the diverse learning activities that are designed for improving students' speaking, reading, and writing. I make it clear to students that my classroom is a place for practice, an opportunity for growth, and emphasizing that making mistakes is a part of the learning process. Students also receive informational feedback. Group work and informational feedback are very effective in my classrooms, as students have always indicated.

I adopt textbooks for my courses, assign homework, and assess student learning. The adopted textbooks are prepared by Kristen Brustad, Mahmoud Al-Batal, and Abbas Al-Tonsi (Brustad et al., 2010; Brustad et al., 2013) and are useful in helping students progress in accordance with the authors' philosophies. Each textbook contains various topics, drills, and activities, and each level leads students to move smoothly to the next level. I give assignments on a regular basis. The assignments are mainly drills in the textbooks, which include filling out blanks, writing out sentences, grammar-related drills, listening and reacting to a story in the textbook, and recording passages designed for comprehension and practice reading. Informational feedback is given to students, which is not meant to judge them but rather

to show them what they need to do to improve. Students are encouraged to build on their strengths and successes.

I have more than 10 years of Arabic teaching experience. I have used the same series of textbooks several times and thus have a good knowledge in the Arabic textbook content (e.g., textbooks' materials) and expertise in teaching Arabic. I feel competent in the classroom and I can determine students' learning needs, evaluate their progress, and design activities for their learning easily. I provide students with quizzes, a midterm, and a final exam.

In addition to in-class learning experiences, I also encourage students to engage in out-of-classroom campus activities related to Arabic. I arrange conversational partner opportunities with native speakers of Arabic. This practice has proven to be a very significant learning experience, as students have the chance to practice speaking the language with native speakers of Arabic and understand the Arabic culture through direct interaction with individuals from Arabic backgrounds. The Arabic club, also sponsors several activities on campus and has extended students' learning of the language. On one occasion, for example, the club sponsored an Arabic dinner for all students on campus. Such events influence students' motivation to learn Arabic and encourage them to put more time and effort in the class.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This chapter presents the methodology for my evaluation study, which focused on understanding the factors that influenced student enrollment in Arabic courses at my institution. My study questions, participant selection and description, the study design, data collection plans, and data analysis plans are all described below.

#### **Study Questions**

Q1. What factors influence students to join the Arabic program at my college?

Q2. What factors influence students to continue to enroll in subsequent higher-level Arabic courses?

Appendix B contains the interview protocol.

#### **Participants**

All former students in the years 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 were eligible to participate in the study, regardless of gender, academic major, ethnicity, or linguistic background. To recruit participants, I emailed my former students-- those who were on my Arabic course rosters for the years 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020--and informed them about my intent to recruit interview participants. I chose the first six who responded. My participants were six former students--four women and two men--in the Arabic program at my institution (see Table 1). Ethnically speaking, three were white, two black, and one Hispanic. Participants were full-time students earning a Bachelor's degree in various majors and minors at the institution. Students were previously



enrolled in at least two courses in Arabic. Though linguistic background was not an inclusion or exclusion criteria, all six participants were native speakers of English.

**Table 1.** *Participant Information*

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number of Semesters in Arabic</b>	<b>Major and Minor</b>
1	Mary	23	F	4 courses	Major: Biology Minor: Religious Studies
2	James	24	M	4 courses	Major: Political Science Minor: Middle East and Africa Studies
3	Sara	20	F	3 courses	Major: International relations & Global Affairs Minor: Middle East and Africa Studies
4	Linda	23	F	5 courses	Major: International relations & Global Affairs Minor: Middle East and Africa Studies
5	Paul	23	M	4 courses	Major: History Minor: Religious studies
6	Karen	24	F	2 courses	Major: Women’s and gender studies Minor: Religious studies

Although I began working at the college in 2014, I excluded former students in the years 2014, 2015, 2016. I thought that the recent participants (i.e., 2017, 2018, 2018, and 2020) would have fresher memories and stories to share with me. The older groups (i.e., 2014, 2015, and 2016) might, by 2020 when data were collected, have forgotten some of the details of their Arabic experiences, which might be significant for the evaluation. These former may not have recalled the exact feelings they had toward learning Arabic after many years of graduation. Therefore, the data collected from recently graduated participants would be more accurate and realistic.

## **Design of the Study**

Through this evaluation, I studied student enrollment in an Arabic Program at a college. The qualitative design allowed me to investigate a particular problem of practice--low student enrollment-- in a specific context my workplace. This design was a good fit, as it allowed me to get in-depth explanations and details about students' enrollment decisions in the Arabic Program. This design enabled me to dive deep and learn from students about the factors that motivated them to study Arabic and remain in the Arabic program. To accomplish this evaluation, I conducted in-depth interviews.

## **Data Collection**

In this evaluation, I conducted in-depth interviews, which was an effective tool to dig deep into a specific subject and gave me a chance to interact with the participant and pose follow-up questions. I was able to listen to former students' opinions, attitudes, and examples. I used semi-structured interviews because this type of interviews usually allows the investigator to ask a predetermined list of questions as well as follow-up questions as needed, which enabled me to dig deep into some areas that seemed interesting and useful for the investigation.

Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes. Before each interview, I made sure that everything was set up for a successful interview; my interview location was quiet and my interviewee has all the necessary information about the interview. During each interview, I asked my pre-planned questions, follow-up questions, and took notes during the audio-recorded interviews to capture any non-verbal cues that may not have been captured by transcription.

There was no need to conduct follow-up interviews since the data collected were rich and detailed. I achieved saturation for responses. I had enough time (i.e., 45-60 minutes) to receive extensive feedback about my two evaluation questions. I thought that I would not get additional

information after my original interviews. The data collected were full of similar ideas and repeated patterns, which was an indication to me that my data reached saturation. If I felt that there was information missing, I would have returned to the participants to ask, but did not need to.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Ary et al. (2002), data analysis involves three stages: “organizing the data, summarizing the data, and interpreting the data” (p. 465). Data analysis involves “reducing and organizing the data, synthesizing, searching for significant patterns, and discovering what is important” (p. 465). Once I finished the six interviews, I had them transcribed, coded, and analyzed. I conducted and audio recorded the interviews on Zoom. Reliable software (i.e., Rev.com) was used for transcribing my data. The software helped me transfer my interviews from the spoken to the written form.

The emic approach was adopted for data analysis. This approach helped my data drive my analysis and findings. This way helped me understand the real insider perspectives of my interviewees (e.g., thoughts and feelings). My themes emerged from my interview data. My coding was inductive, which was done in two cycles: open coding and pattern coding (see Table 2). The open coding, the first cycle of coding, identified any segment of data that was useful to my study. During this phase, a large number of codes emerged and I used the exact words and phrases of the participant or what is called “in vivo codes.” The pattern coding was my next step, which was intended to collapse codes together. I put my list of codes into a relatively shorter list of categories that helped me organize my different codes into meaningful clusters (Lichtman, 2013). In this second cycle of coding, I tried to identify relationships among open codes.

**Table 2.** *Selected Example of Open Coding and Pattern Coding*

<b>Open Codes</b>	<b>Pattern Codes</b>
It is not a romance language	Interest in a different language and culture
It is such a different language	
I thought I would go somewhere out of the box	
I think there was the cultural part of it that made me want to learn Arabic	
I wanted to understand the culture	
I wanted to learn about a non-Western culture by studying the language	
A future career decision	Future jobs opportunities
Doing government work	
Jobs in the future	
To work with underrepresented communities in North Africa and Middle East	
It would make me a more attractive candidate for jobs	
It would set me apart in terms of my resume	
It aligned with my field of study	An alignment between learning Arabic and other relevant courses
I was interested in Middle East and North African politics	
Arabic went along with my studies	
In order to truly be able to understand the middle east, I should know the language as well	
I studied more about the Middle East which fueled my passion	
I like to study the ancient near east, more like Babylon, Egypt, and Assyria	
I thought it was easier than Japanese and Chinese	A moderately difficult language to learn
I thought about whether or not the language would be too much for me to handle	
I just knew it was not as difficult as Chinese Arabic was not super complicated	
I heard Chinese and Japanese are very hard to understand	
To handle the workload	
I enjoyed learning it so much and started enjoying it outside of class	

**Table 2 (Continued).**

I think my desire to learn more about the culture and the language	Increase of interest in the language
I began watching Arabic movies and television	
I did not want to stop learning it even outside of class	
I loved the language	
Curiosity about something new and love for the language	
Everybody was on the same boat at the same time	Supportive experiences
It was really nice having a support system of people	
Having all my friends in class helped me decide to keep going	
The kind of community environment of the classroom	
I think that classroom setting really helped us build comradery with one another	
We were all moving as a group and you can feel everyone is alive	The Teacher
Your teaching style was another reason to continue	
Without the teacher, we would not have been able to cultivate the same community	
The teacher was acting as a guide, we were learning on our own	
The teacher was understanding in many ways	
I really enjoyed learning from the teacher	Competency in the language for jobs
Mastering the language would be more appropriate for long-term job in that area	
Wanting to speak Arabic in the future	
In terms of career development, I wanted to someday get to a point of fluency	
I wanted to be able to use Arabic after I graduated	
Not just put Arabic on a resume but actually use it	
I wanted to graduate to with some sort of ability to be conversational so that I can put that on a resume	

## **Thematic Analysis**

I employed thematic analysis to report my findings. After the preliminary data analysis, coding, categorizing, and seeking patterns (Grbich, 2013), I started looking for connections/relationships between my patterns to generate themes. I tried to make a coherent understanding of why and how these codes connect in a way they answer my study questions. My themes were supported by quotations and vivid examples taken from my interviewees' speech through which I connected my readers to my participants' experiences, emotions, depth of details that shared with me in the first place. I made my themes engaging and interesting answers to my study questions. I finally interpreted my themes in the light of my conceptual framework and some articles in my literature review section trying to position my study in the larger scope of literature. I established these connections by seeing how my results agree/disagree or confirm/disconfirm to other studies relevant to the topic in my field (Grbich, 2013).

## **College, Program, and Instructor**

My context is a liberal arts college in the Southeastern United States. The college offers undergraduate programs that lead to degrees in Bachelors of Science, Bachelors of Arts, and Bachelors of Fine Arts. The total undergraduate enrollment does not usually exceed 2000 students. Some of the popular majors offered include anthropology, biological sciences, social sciences, psychology, international business, creative writing, music, literature, English, and Spanish. Students are usually between 18-22 years old. Classes are typically small with a 25-seat capacity. There are sports facilities, a library, classrooms, offices, and laboratories. There are also facilities designed for art exhibits, theatrical and musical productions, athletic events, cultural clubs (e.g., Arabic club), a weekly newspaper, a radio station, and sports teams. Several

language programs are offered on campus, such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, French, Italian, and Spanish. Some of these programs offer majors while others offer only minors (e.g. Arabic). The college requires students to take two semesters (or the equivalent) of a foreign language as a requirement for graduation. The Arabic program offers five courses in Arabic including elementary level (i.e., AB 101 and AB 102), intermediate level (i.e., AB 201 and AB 202), and advanced level (i.e., AB 301).

My philosophy of teaching is to maintain an engaging learning environment for every student in a supportive classroom. I believe that a language classroom is a place for learning and practice and not for judging students' outcomes. Foreign language students usually make speaking, writing, and spelling mistakes in the classroom during their learning journey.

Therefore, if they do not feel comfortable in the classroom and that they would be judged for their mistakes, most likely they would give up. To create a safe learning environment, I arrange in-group activities for which students work together, learn from each other, and build their own learning experiences. I encourage them to attend outside classroom activities including conversational partner gatherings and social events where they meet native speakers of Arabic and get into conversations, which helps them improve their Arabic fluency and broaden their international perspectives. My students also receive informational feedback, which is very effective in my classrooms, as students have consistently indicated.

I am the sole instructor of Arabic at the college. In a typical class I introduce the topic to students, put them into small groups, give them a task to work on, set a time for this activity, and inform them of my expectations. I leave them to work while I observe their progress and answer questions they may have during the process. During this process, they work together, ask each other questions, and make suggestions to each other. During this stage, my role is to facilitate

their learning experiences, answer questions, and giving feedback. When they finish the task, they report their answers verbally and get my feedback on their performance and outcomes. I will explain the task to the whole group, showing where they did well and where they need to improve. For some classes, we do role-play at the end of the class meeting. My instruction employs hands-on demonstrations, experiences, and visuals. There will be assignments for students to do at home including videos to respond to, grammar drills, vocabulary memorization, and passages to read. There are quizzes, a midterm exam, and a final exam.

### **Position Analysis**

As an interviewer, my insider status afforded me access to understanding students' perspectives. I am the sole Arabic teacher in the college. I had knowledge about the problem of practice, circumstances, and participants. As the former teacher of the students and the one who identified this particular problem of practice, I had a strong desire to address the problem. I consistently felt engaged in the investigation process. Although the evaluation could have been conducted by another researcher, he/she might not have exactly the same understanding as mine of the contextual problem or possess the same quantity of motivation to deal with it. Therefore, the fact that I am both the former teacher and the evaluator gave me a privilege and had a positive influence on this evaluation.

On the other hand, this double role is a challenge too. Although former students no longer had an academic commitment to their former teacher, they might not have been totally forthcoming about some less than positive feelings they might have had during their learning process since they were talking to their former teacher. Additionally, I might have been biased, even unintentionally, on my preferences and interests when it came to analyzing my data and reporting my findings; I am not sure if there were any.



## **Chapter Four**

### **Findings**

This chapter presents the findings of my evaluation study, which focused on understanding the factors that influenced student enrollment in Arabic courses at my institution. These findings are based on the data obtained from six interviews conducted with former students in the Arabic program at the college. Findings were reported via themes, as discussed in chapter 3, which best answered my study questions. The purpose of this study has been to examine the contextual factors, causal elements, and to obtain reasons that motivate students to join the Arabic program and continue learning the language by enrolling in more advanced Arabic courses. The study helped me, the investigator, to know why students enrolled in Arabic courses and what made them persist in learning this foreign language. Two study questions guided this investigation:

Q1. What factors influence students to join the Arabic program at my college?

Q2. What factors influence students to continue to enroll in subsequent higher-level Arabic courses?

#### **Themes Generated from Data for the First Study Question**

##### ***Study Question 1: What factors influence students to join the Arabic program at my college?***

Following my analysis of the interview data, I identified four themes that address this study question. I found that students joined the Arabic program for 1) an interest in learning a different language (a non-romance language) and a curiosity to discover the Middle East and

North African region, 2) seeing an alignment between learning Arabic and other relevant courses, 3) future Job opportunities and 4) thinking that Arabic was in the medium level of difficulty. A description of each theme and representative statements from participants are provided below to illustrate the themes.

***Theme 1: Students joined the Arabic program for an interest in learning a different language (a non-romance language) and a curiosity to discover the Middle East and North African region***

Participant 1, Mary, intended to join the Spanish program at the College. She had many good reasons to do that. First, she has some Latino ties, and some of her family members speak Spanish. Second, she started learning Spanish in high school, so she wanted to build upon what she learned in k12 classes instead of starting to learn a new language from ground zero, which would not be the case if she were to learn another language. Arabic was her second choice as a language to study. What brought her attention to Arabic was a close high school friend who told her about a successful experience in Arabic learning in a summer program he had. Her rationale to study Spanish was strong; however, she ultimately signed up for Arabic class when Spanish classes were full. Although she could have switched back to the Spanish program as some spots became available, she decided to stay in the elementary Arabic course and she was encouraged by a curiosity to learn new things:

I think there was the culture part of it that really made me want to learn Arabic more than the other languages... I think Latino culture is really beautiful but I . . . already experienced that at home... I did not feel a need to seek it out through academics but I do not think I would have been able to experience Arabic culture if not for learning the language.

What made Arabic so attractive to Mary was her desire to discover the region's cultures and the fact that she had zero knowledge about the language. She was excited that she would start a language whose writing system takes the opposite direction to English. While English is written from left to right, Arabic is written from right to left. She even thought that she might face difficulty in writing Arabic since she was left-handed. She was also fascinated with the Arabic alphabet shapes and sounds, “there are letters in the alphabet that I’ve never had to learn or pronounce before.” She also believed that learning a language was the tool to understand its culture. She said, “I can get to know people and experience culture in a way that ... if you do not speak the language, it is a lot harder to experience a culture in a full way.” She loved to travel and get the experience of studying abroad in an Arab country where she would meet different people and learn from them about their own culture and have the opportunity to have a better understanding of the region and its people. She did that later.

Whereas Mary had a close friend who awakened her curiosity in Arabic, Sara had a family member who awakened this curiosity within her. Sara’s father traveled to Arabic-speaking countries several times. He frequently told her stories from that region and expressed how beautiful Arabic seemed to be. This was how her interest in Arabic and the Middle Eastern and North African cultures started. Sara took French classes in high school but did not want to take French at college again. She expressed this idea as,

I did not really want to take another European-centric language. I was actually debating between Latin and something else before I reached Arabic because they are not common languages that are spoken a lot in the United States. So I ended up landing on Arabic because it is the least European language of all the ones that [the college] offers.

Sara did not want to study a European language. She was more interested in less spoken languages in the US. To her, Arabic seemed very attractive. She said, “Arabic stood out to me because it is so different from European and Western that I wanted to take something new.” Sara recalled that in high school she had done a research paper about European languages including English, French, Spanish, and Italian. She saw similarities in most of these languages.

Sara was very excited to see Arabic among the course offerings list for students. She said, “I think learning the language is the least a person could do when they are going to a different culture into a different country to help other people.” Neither her middle school nor the high school offered any Arabic language classes. However, she was scared that Arabic might be so difficult to learn initially. Her ideas about learning the language changed and she enjoyed acquiring a new language.

On the other hand, Linda’s interest in learning Arabic was sparked through a course (i.e., Middle Eastern politics) she took early in her college journey. She wanted to learn a language that was “less common” in the United States and to familiarize herself with the Arabic region “politically and culturally.” She was not interested in any romance languages such as Spanish or French because they are languages widely pursued by students in the United States. Linda was debating between enrolling in Arabic and Mandarin. She finally chose Arabic. She explained,

I did not want to do a romance language because they are just too widely spoken. I am already pretty, conversational in Spanish. I was not really interested in just like going through college and mumbling my way through a language that I could kind of speak. I wanted to take on something new as opposed to a language that I already knew.

The Middle Eastern politics course opened Linda’s eyes to a region she knew very little about. In that class, she learned about the Arab Spring that spread across the Arab countries and the

“complex political history of the region and different countries.” She also learned about the political situation in Iraq after 2003. Her interest in learning Arabic has emerged since then, and she felt that “in order to truly be able to understand that, [she] should know the language as well.”

Paul looked at Spanish as a “kind of old French,” which was not something that interested him. He studied Spanish in middle school and high school. Just like Linda, Paul believed that western European languages were taught everywhere across the country. For that reason, he did not want to study a romance language. He did not also want to study Chinese or Japanese because he heard that these languages were too difficult. He was indeed interested in learning Latin but he gave up the idea since Latin was a written language, not spoken in today’s world. As a history major and a person who was interested in ancient pre-Islamic history, he appreciates the "uniqueness" feature in the Arabic language. He gave an example of how writing Arabic seem to be artistically beautiful:

Writing is used as its own art form and designs. If you see caliphate artifacts or Turkish artifacts you walk into, I remember it, this local art museum, it was like a room that was designed, and I think it was a Sultan's palace. You see the big arch is the crossing flowers and the designs and how the Arabic language is written in as a design in and of itself. So it's like their words and their language becomes art. Whereas you don't really ever see that as much in English.

On a different occasion, he reiterated the idea of uniqueness:

I thought learning a whole other system of language would be just fascinating because it is whole different, so I assumed as different just cause there are different origins,

different roots. I thought that would be fun to learn. That is why I saw it as different. It is not a romance [language].

Paul felt “intrigued” by the Arabic language, which was the main reason he joined the Arabic program. He also believed that the region had a long history and fascinating culture, which he wanted to learn more about. Like Linda, he thought that Arabic would not only help him understand the culture but also grow intellectually. He said, “Learning would help me learn more about the culture, about the people... that’s why I learned Arabic, just expand my worldview greater than the average American.”

The September 11 events triggered Karen’s interest to learn Arabic. Her initial interest stemmed mainly from her desire to understand Islam and Middle Eastern region. She was in K-12 when the 9/11 events occurred. When she entered college, she took several classes related to religion and ended up minoring in religious studies. Answering the question, “why did you choose to learn Arabic?” she replied,

I think this all stems from an understanding that I had gone through most of my life. Now having grown up in this post 9/11 United States. I was growing up in a society that never gave me opportunities to really learn about a culture and people that were just outside of what I had grown up with and what I had been exposed to and kind of wanting to educate myself in all areas, to be able to build connections with people across just like across languages has inspired me to learn languages.

Karen was not passionate about any of the languages that she knew were available at the college. She “put off taking a language for almost [her] entire college experience” until she found that there was an Arabic program on campus. She was very happy to know that Arabic was an option. She expressed her excitement in these words, “that was a really exciting moment for me to rise

[to] this thing that I thought might be challenging that was going to be unlike anything I'd ever really done before." Karen did not want to take any romance language. She heard a lot from students that French and Spanish were extremely difficult classes. She provided a rationale for choosing Arabic, not any other language:

If I had had to take any one of them [any other language], it probably would have been Spanish. . . .I know that is such an important language, but at the end of the day, I really had to ask myself, what are my interests, what am I going to be passionate about even if it is difficult? What language would it be important for me to have a foundation in as a person, kind of doing the things that I want to do in my future? Arabic really checked all of those boxes for me.

Karen put off taking a language course until her third year of college because she did not want to study a language for the sake of fulfilling the language requirement. She wanted to study something that she really liked. When she found that Arabic was among the possible options, she joined Arabic immediately, with delight and enthusiasm.

In summary, the interest in learning a different language (not a romance language) emerged as a major factor that students identified as having influenced them to join the Arabic program at my college. All participants emphasized that they joined the Arabic program for an interest in learning a 'different' language and a curiosity to discover the Arab culture, region, and/or Islam. Although participant 2, James, did not elaborate on this theme, he still made it clear that he wanted to do something different from what he did before. Some of the participants had initially heard some good stories about Arabic before attending college while others did not know anything about knowledge about the language. All of them thought that learning Arabic would be challenging and were willing to take this challenge. All participants expressed

excitement about learning Arabic, and once they began, they continued in the Arabic program for more than one year with the exception of Karen, who graduated.

***Theme 2: Students joined the Arabic program for seeing an alignment between learning Arabic and other relevant courses***

James, participant 2, thought that adding Arabic to his schedule was a ‘logical’ decision since the Arabic language aligned with the other courses he was taking in political science, international relations, and Middle Eastern studies. He was not aware that he had to take Arabic anyway since he was minoring in Middle Eastern studies (two semesters in Arabic were required for this minor). James was not passionate about learning languages in general. He waited until the third year to start seriously thinking about adding a language to his schedule. He had no options other than doing two semesters in any language to meet the graduation requirement. Before he added the Arabic class, he sought recommendations from a close friend for what language to study. His friend encouraged him to pursue Arabic. James said, “When we started talking, I was telling him, I was interested in the Middle East and North African politics . . . we both thought maybe Arabic would be a good and logical progression.” James ended up with a double minor--both related to Arabic. Therefore, choosing Arabic was a “logical progression.” He admitted that he never showed a passion for languages and that “language has never really clicked as a potential interest.” However, learning Arabic was “something that went along with [his] studies and something that could benefit [him] in the future job-wise.”

Like James, Linda thought Arabic would enhance her understanding of the Middle East “politically and culturally.” Before taking the Middle Eastern politics course at the college, Arabic was not among her top language preferences. Nevertheless, after she sat in on that class, Arabic became her number one choice. The Middle Eastern politics course was very rewarding



and eye-opening in that several topics were discussed, including the politics of the region, the war in Iraq, and events in Tunisia and Egypt. She thought that learning Arabic would enrich her understanding of her other studies in the Middle East:

In my Middle East politics course, we focused on the Arab Spring, which I thought was a really interesting period of time. The Middle East was not something I knew a lot about . . . After taking the course and talking about the diversity that exists throughout the Middle East as well as the complex political history of the religion and different countries, I wanted to learn more and I felt that in order to be able to understand that I should know the language as well.

While Linda was interested in the current Arab political climate, Paul was more passionate about the ancient history of the region and its inhabitants such as Ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, Assyrians, and Canaanites. He found a strong connection between Arabic as a foreign language and the history classes he was taking. He believed that “The middle East has a long rich cultural history that is often ignored in the West.” He was fond of the ancient history “like ancient Babylon, Egypt, and Assyria.”

Just like James and Linda, Karen needed to wait for two years before she decided to do language classes. During that time, she took several courses in women and gender studies, religious studies, and Middle Eastern studies. She was not aware that the college offers Arabic classes. In the first two-year classes, she learned about groups and cultures she had never thought she would learn about. She grew up hearing about Arab women and she had gotten in many discussions as a high school student about the nature of women’s empowerment in other cultures outside the United States. She expressed her feelings in these words,

I guess I was just frustrated with the ways people around me growing up and acted towards kind of Arab culture. I knew that just was misguided and prejudice, but I had never been given the opportunities to step outside of myself and to learn about kind of other people in places and languages. Arabic was at the top of my list as something that I was interested in, that I was already taking the steps towards studying through religious studies. I thought that bringing the language into that would only enhance the work that I was already doing in my head.

She also explained that her interest in religions such as Islam drew her to minor in religious studies and to take other classes related to the Middle East. She thought that most people seemed to be undereducated about these subjects and her desire was to “familiarize and learn more about a language and a culture and kind of a religious tradition altogether is really what inspired [her] to pursue Arabic.”

In summary, most of the participants saw a significant relationship between learning Arabic and other courses related to international relations, politics, history, religion, Middle East and North African studies, etc. They did not study Arabic only because it was a requirement for some minors such as Middle Eastern studies. They saw that learning Arabic was a necessity to enhance their understandings of that region culturally and politically. Four out of the six participants made such a connection between Arabic and other courses and it seemed to be a rational decision to them. Therefore, alignment with other relevant courses emerged as another theme influencing students to join the Arabic program.

### ***Theme 3: Students joined the Arabic program for future Job opportunities***

Career seemed to be a major factor (number one factor) for three of the participants. Some participants were linking learning Arabic to future job opportunities. James thought that

having Arabic on his resume would increase his chances to work for the U.S. government. He said, “It was mainly a future career decision.” He added, “If you have any kind of history and taking Arabic, your application jumps very high up the list... it could help in the future.” He thought that “Arabic is a very difficult language, especially for English speakers.” However, once James enrolled in the Arabic courses, he continued for two years because he enjoyed learning the language.

Sara was more interested in humanitarian work. She had a goal of working with underrepresented communities in North Africa and the Middle East, especially women and children in refugee camps and those who were discriminated against in the Arab region. She was aware that she could easily have a translator to do the job, but she wanted to communicate directly with people in need. She said, “I know having a translator is possible when you work through the United Nations or when you work in international organizations, but I thought speaking the language would be more appropriate for a long-term job in that area.” Sara rationalized why she believed that learning a language was useful for any person who wanted to do humanitarian work:

I think it is really important to be able to communicate with the people that you are trying to help, especially when you are doing humanitarian work because when there is that language barrier plus a cultural barrier, it can make it hard to connect with the people that you are trying to help. I think learning the language is the least a person could do when they are going to a different culture into a different country to help other people.

Linda emphasized that speaking Arabic fluently would set her apart in the job market. She knew that Arabic was a critical language in the United States; therefore, she aimed to be fluent in Arabic for career prospects. She thought that it was difficult to become fluent in Arabic

but she wanted to reach fluency in Arabic. She said, “I know that the state department and other jobs and international affairs typically have more positions open for people who are able to speak Arabic, and some jobs will even pay you more if you can speak the language.” Just like James, Linda placed the career factor as her main reason to join the Arabic program and learn the language. Linda described how her interest in learning Arabic grew to exceed her initial career orientation:

I would say initially I wanted something that would set myself apart when I started to pursue my career in international affairs. That would make me a more attractive candidate for jobs. After taking the language and learning more about the region, my interest went beyond my career. I just became more interested in the language and my own personal growth, but initially, it was about being able to diversify my resume and myself as a job candidate.

Linda, therefore, continued learning Arabic for more than two years and finally minored in Arabic after taking all the required courses.

In summary, three out of the six participants brought up the ‘career’ theme. However, all of the three participants ranked the career factor at the top of other factors to study Arabic. They linked learning Arabic to their resumes and/or job future opportunities. They were aware that by learning Arabic, which was a critical language in the United States, they would be attractive candidates to prospective employers.

***Theme 4: Students joined the Arabic program for thinking that Arabic was a moderately difficult language to learn***

Level of language acquisition difficulty emerged as another theme in the study. Most participants admitted that they joined the Arabic program because they thought that Arabic

would be easier to learn than some other languages like Chinese and Japanese. On the other hand, they thought that Arabic would be more difficult than Spanish, French, or Latin. As a science major, Mary compared Arabic to science courses. She thought that the Arabic language classroom would provide her with a different interactive experience compared to science classes. She also thought the class would be easier than chemistry and physics classes she was taking:

I think having an easier class when you are filled with classes like chemistry and difficult classes, you want a class that is easier, that is less like, you have to solve all these equations and you have to do all of this stuff. So I do not know if easier is the best word, but in that kind of sense, I do not have to do all this math and have to struggle with physics.

Mary also thought that the Arabic class would be smaller than her science classes. She preferred and learned better in smaller classes: “I really enjoy having closer interactions with a professor because you are more likely to learn and like gain that knowledge if you have smaller class.” She was also encouraged to sit in the class when she knew that some of her friends signed up for Arabic. She was motivated to start learning Arabic. She was expecting a positive learning experience and a fun class.

As for James, he asked a couple of people about the Arabic program on campus and heard positive feedback. He first thought that Arabic was very difficult to learn but after hearing others’ opinions, he changed his mind. He signed up for Arabic with confidence that he would succeed. He said, “I heard really good things... in Arabic, I never heard anyone take the class and have a [negative] experience in it.” Like James, Sara had a similar attitude; “I actually thought it would probably be a little bit more difficult than the other languages.” She already had considered dropping the class if needed. Her worries disappeared when she heard from a friend

encouraging information about the Arabic program at the college. After the first semester, she felt that she learned so much, made such progress in a short time, and was successful, so she decided to continue taking courses in Arabic.

One of the things that Linda was considering while taking a language class was “whether or not the language would be too much for [her] to handle.” She was not expecting a “too complicated” language. She needed to wait until the sophomore year to study a language when she was sure which language to choose. She cared about her “workload” as a college student. She chose Arabic only after she felt that she would “be able to handle the workload.”

Karen, on the other hand, was very happy to know that the college offered Arabic courses on campus. Her first questions were “Is this going to be too challenging for me?” and “Am I going to have too much on my plate by taking this on?” She took some time to look up reviews that past students had left about the Arabic classes. She was excited to see good reviews; “I felt like I was being set up for success entering the course.” Therefore, her initial thought changed from a feeling that “it was just going to be an extremely stressful experience to take a language at [the college]” to a “reassurance that it would actually be an extremely enjoyable and beneficial experience.” So, understanding that the Arabic course would likely not be more demanding than other courses in addition to knowing that previous students had positive experiences in learning Arabic reassured her that Arabic would be the right choice.

### **Themes Generated from Data for the Second Study Question**

#### ***Study Question 2: What factors influence students to continue to enroll in subsequent higher-level Arabic courses?***

I identified four themes that address this study question. I found that students continued to enroll in subsequent higher-level Arabic courses for 1) they became more interested in the

language and culture after completing the elementary course in Arabic, 2) they were encouraged by the supportive learning experiences accompanied their learning of Arabic, 3) they liked the teacher's personality and teaching style, and 4) they wanted to be competent in the language so that they would meet future jobs' requirements and be able to do the work efficiently. A description of each theme and representative statements from participants are provided below to illustrate the themes.

***Theme 1: Students became more interested in the language and culture after completing the elementary course in Arabic***

After she finished the first semester in the Arabic program, Mary became more interested in the language and the Middle Eastern culture. She wanted to learn as much as she could. She was excited every time she was in class and felt a “growing love for the language.” Her family was supportive and happy to see her making progress in her studies. To Mary, Arabic was more fun and exciting than her other classes, “I got to have a breath of fresh air and learn a language in a way that feels more natural... it makes me happy ... why not just keep going.” As her interest in the language increased, she started making plans to travel abroad. Mary believed that the college did very well promoting study abroad trips, which helped students to discover the different world cultures. That was a big motivation for her to continue studying Arabic. She started working hard on improving her Arabic speaking abilities so that she would be able to converse fluently with native speakers. Mary said,

I was on a bus headed somewhere and there was [a person] on the bus who was speaking in Arabic to his friends. I said, hello to them in Arabic. I explained I am a student. I am from here. It was a really obviously simple conversation, but it was so exciting that I

could communicate with someone in a different language. Even if it was a simple conversation, it was just so exciting.

What increased Mary's interest in Arabic the most was the conversational partner activity on campus, which gave her the opportunity to consistently and regularly practice Arabic with native speakers. Mary said, "[The Arab students] were supportive. It was a nice environment where you not only practice your Arabic ... but also you learn about cultural stuff and eat some food and do a dance and listen to some music." She also thought that offering an Arabic minor, which the college finally approved, was another good thing that the college made. This also motivated her to continue taking classes in Arabic and stay in the program.

As for Sara, she took the language very seriously after she finished the first course in Arabic, "I am a perfectionist when it comes to my schoolwork." She was putting in the effort outside of class as well. She would finish assignments on time and watch Arabic movies in her free time so that she would be fluent in Arabic. Answering the question, "what made you want to continue learning Arabic?" Sara said,

I think I was doing really well in it...I really enjoyed learning it so much that it came easy to me once we started getting to vocab and grammar, and I started enjoying it outside of class and watching middle Eastern shows and shows that have Arabic subtitles or audio. So because I was doing so well in the class that really encouraged me to keep going.

Like Mary, the study abroad program on campus encouraged her to continue learning foreign languages. She was debating between going to Morocco and the United Arab Emirates. She finally chose Morocco following a friend's advice, who already spent a semester in Morocco. Sara said, "Listening to her stories... was really interesting and eye-opening and showing that



Arabic isn't the same in every country....the culture is different [as well].” Sara also found the Arabic-related events on campus, arranged by the Arabic club, were interesting. She felt happy to participate in some of the events. She said, “In the events, I went to, I saw a few of the older students who were close to being able to speak Arabic fluently ... My desire to be able to do that is what motivated me [to continue].”

Linda, who joined the Arabic program motivated by a Middle Eastern course she took early in her college study, continued mainly for the same reason, “[Middle Eastern classes] fueled my passion to want to learn more of [Arabic].” However, her confidence in being able to master Arabic largely increased after finishing the first elementary course. Therefore, she decided to continue. Like Mary, she started to have plans to travel abroad, which she eventually did. After she completed three courses in Arabic at the college, she went to Morocco. She said,

Once I got back from studying abroad, I became even more serious about the language and wanted to continue because I progressed so much as an Arabic speaker while I was in Morocco, which led me to take courses over the summer as well as at [the college] and that was really rewarding.

In Morocco, she realized that the Moroccan dialect was so hard to understand. There were times when she was struggling. She said,

It is too hard, but I still kept going because I knew that I had put in a year and a half of time working to learn this language and that it was important that I was making progress. The majority of the time [there] I wanted to keep going and understand more about the language and how it worked.

Linda did not rely merely on classroom assignments. She did many other activities as well such as watching instructional videos and news channels like Al-Jazeera and reading Arabic

newspapers and articles about the Arab news and politics in the region. She challenged herself by doing such activities. However, as Linda progressed in the Arabic language, her interest went beyond the desire to be fluent in the language. She said, “The study of the language and the region became more personal to me as I continued my study of it.” She thought that learning a new language would be good for her personal growth, which became another incentive to continue learning Arabic.

Just like, Mary, Sara, and Linda, Paul thought, “there was a lot more to learn.” He felt that he was good at learning Arabic and was happy to continue. He spent a whole semester in the elementary Arabic course and thought it was worth continuing with the sequence, “You are building off of what you already know, so you do not need to start from scratch. So that's why I thought it was worth taking.” His interest in the religious studies was another reason to continue:

I was also very much interested in the religious studies department and I worked with [the director] at the center of spiritual life. Having that learning about the Arabic culture and Arabic religion, that definitely influenced me to keep studying Arabic.

Paul used to accompany some Arab friends to the gym and enjoyed spending time with them. This company with the native speakers of Arabic was a big factor that maintained his interest in learning Arabic and made him stay in the program. He also loved the Arabic events on campus where he used to meet with Arabs and learn about their traditions, habits, food, and music.

Karen thought that Arabic was one of the most valuable classes she has ever taken, “I was so excited to be [in the Arabic class]. There was nowhere else I wanted to be.” She had positive experiences in the first semester of Arabic, which made her want to continue. However, there was a year gap between the first Arabic course she took and the following course, as she

needed to take some courses required for her major. She was unhappy for not adding Arabic to her schedule. She said,

In that year off that, I was not taking Arabic, I was realizing that I made the wrong decision. I was sitting in my other classes, wishing that I were in Arabic. That was something that I was surprised by. I know I would not have felt in another language class. During the year off, she made a study trip to Cambodia. There was a day on their trip where they stayed in a city and interacted with the small Muslim community there. She was very glad that she was able to practice speaking and reading Arabic with those people most of that day.

Karen felt that she was very good at the language and learned quickly. To her, it was never an option to not continue. She thought that the Arabic class was engaging, “Once you take the pressure off of learning, the learning comes easier and the excitement about learning comes easier.” Karen’s academic mentor was her number one supporter who encouraged her to pursue the program, “My mentor was a big deciding factor for me in pursuing the language and sticking with it.” She described her mentor’s influence:

My mentor was the one that told me just because you are not in a class, does not mean your learning has to stop. If this is something that you care about, you can find other ways to learn it. You just might have to do a little extra legwork on your part. That was what kept me reviewing my flashcards and flipping through my textbook every once in a while and keeping it fresh enough in my mind that I thought I could.

She also thought the Arabic related events on campus were very encouraging:

The most exciting part of my experience in my Arabic class was being able to have dinners with some [Native speakers of Arabic] students and being able to play games together, practice speaking English and Arabic with one another. [This] really facilitated

my learning and it brought my learning outside of the classroom and into a kind of a real-world application in a lot of ways.

Karen graduated after taking two semesters in Arabic. She kept good memories and stories to tell to other students encouraging them to study Arabic.

In summary, all participants indicated that their interests in the Arabic language and culture increased after finishing the first elementary Arabic course. They felt that there was a lot more to learn in the next semesters to come. Many of them continued because they felt that they were good at learning Arabic and their confidence to succeed was high such as Sara, Linda, and Paul. Many of them mentioned that they developed plans to travel to Arab-speaking countries. Three of them eventually studied abroad. On-campus activities related to the Arabic program helped increase students' interest in continuing learning Arabic. For instance, Students talked high about the conversational partner opportunities, which were seen as encouraging and useful. Therefore, the increase in students' interests in learning the language and culture emerged as a major factor for students to continue to enroll in Arabic courses at the college.

***Theme 2: The supportive learning experiences encouraged students to continue to enroll in Arabic courses***

Mary ranked the social aspect of the learning experience (i.e. socializing with friends in and out of the classroom) as a main factor for her to continue learning Arabic. She loved coming to class, seeing friends, working and learning together, and wanted such experiences to continue. She said, “we would move our desks together so that it was a lot more like we were closer together and it was tight-knit...it was much more interactive.” She reflected on such a positive experience:

In the group that I was with, we all became friends and a lot of us would only hang out in the context of Arabic. It was that social aspect of having those people that I enjoyed spending time with, who we all got to take this class together.

Mary was very excited to share the news that two of her friends, who had met in the elementary Arabic course and minored in Arabic, married a few months ago. She appreciated all experiences associated with learning Arabic and thought they were positive and rewarding.

James made relationships with many classmates in the Arabic class, which eventually ended up in a form of friendship. They would have respect for each other and often meet outside of the classroom for social or academic events. To James, the Arabic classes offered experiences different from his other classes. He said, “a lot of classes, you might have group projects, but you are never really working together that consistently especially not every class.” He thought that the Arabic courses offered him a unique experience:

I liked the classroom interactions. I think it really helped the group of us that stayed together through to the end... we were friends in the classroom and that we helped each other to succeed. I think that was something that [the teacher] cultivated over the course of two years and that has been unique to that specific experience for me.

He also thought that the fact that Arabic was a sequence of courses offered him a different experience, compared to his other classes, in that the same group of students continued together over the course of two years. He thought, “This was nice and very different from my other classes,” which was a big reason why James continued in the Arabic program.

As for Sara, she enjoyed the classroom environment including group activities and on-campus gatherings. She would always compete with the outstanding students in the class. She would speak in Arabic as much as she could so that she would learn the language faster.

Although she loved competition in the class, she thought that the environment was supportive; she would help others and seek help as well. She said,

We were in our Arabic Snapchat group, we would try and write in Arabic, we have all downloaded an Arabic keyboard and we tried to write in Arabic, we would check each other and it was a really good way to balance learning Arabic in class and outside of class.

Sara also liked how everyone in the class was learning at the same pace and she felt they were on the same boat; all students in her Arabic classroom started from zero ground and gradually built their skills in speaking, writing and reading. She said, “I think being able to rely on your classmates for help, meeting with them outside of class ... really helped.” She also said,

That classroom setting really helped us build comradery with one another... [The teacher] really helped us to be comfortable with our mistakes... when you are comfortable making mistakes in front of the class, it is easier to learn from them without feeling you are being judged. I think all of the things that we did in class really helped build us up as a little small community for us to be a judge-free zone while we are learning.

Sara’s friend was a resource of information to Sara about traveling to Morocco. Sara was excited to listen to her friend’s interesting stories and recommendations. However, Sara could not deny her father’s influence on her decision to continue as well, “I think my dad had a real influence on me continuing it as well.” Whenever she came home for breaks, her father would ask her to teach him some Arabic. Therefore, she felt happy and supported every time she was home.

Karen thought that the benefit for her of taking a year off between the first semester and second semester of Arabic was that she moved through two different groups of students. Both times, she felt that she was among a family. By the end of the first semester of Arabic, she was

so sad to not continue with the same peers because she felt that she had built a strong relationship with the group. She said:

when I took my second semester a year later and I was entering into a class with a group of people, who had already spent a whole semester together from the second I walked into that room, I was like, these people are a family, I am the new person, and I have never had that feeling in a class before, but they were also welcoming.

She added:

They were so kind. I feel I became a part of the family of the class over time, but I have never had that experience in a college class before where I would just genuinely felt like my learning was facilitated by the fact that everybody else wanted to be there as much as I did and cared about the learning we were doing as much as I did.

Karen thought that the community of the class, the supportive environment, and the positive experiences she had were among the major deciding factors for her to continue. She said, "I am a kind of shy person...I was really nervous to take a language class ... I thought I might be embarrassed by it. That ended up not being the case in the class at all." Karen explained why she liked the Arabic class:

We all helped each other learn. ..The class was so interactive. we were always practicing... so I would say what made me good at it was both the patients of the professor, the community of the class, and the way once we were in that room everybody was there to learn Arabic and they were excited to be there.

To Karen, the diverse range of activities and materials made the class engaging and interesting. Such activities included spoken conversation, listening and writing assignments, handouts

activities, and independent work. She said, “I don't think I've ever felt so secure in a learning environment before.”

Linda thought that there was room for everyone to learn more in Arabic and grow academically. She loved how there were in-depth explanations of grammatical and vocabulary work. She was able to review the homework with others and give feedback to one another. She thought that classmates were “definitely helpful in study groups and being able to talk things over and get help from them as fellow English speakers approaching the language from the same lens as [she] was.”

Paul loved the social aspect of the class as well. He knew that his friends were a part of such experiences. When he saw classmates outside of class, he enjoyed their companionship. He would greet his classmates using Arabic phrases outside of class and they would understand what he was saying and reply in Arabic. That was so fun for him. Paul described the Arabic classroom as:

It was engaging. The whole class was interested. It was fun. You are not just going around speaking in a circle; you are actually doing activities to learn that. I think the sense of competition got people involved... We are all moving as a group and you can feel everyone is alive.

The other reason that motivated Paul to stay in the Arabic program was the Middle Eastern Culture course, which was taught by the Arabic teacher. He said,

I think it was Middle Eastern culture with [the Arabic teacher]. That was an enjoyable experience. I liked [the teacher]. I liked our group. The language was interesting. It is useful to know in the current political climate. I said, you know what, I enjoy this course, I am having a good time, let's just keep the happiness flowing.



Paul and some of his classmates kept some inside jokes, which made the Arabic experience special. He said, “I really liked our group. I remember we talk in Arabic and then I go to Starbucks with them afterward. That is really what got me to stay.” There was also a personal influence on motivating Paul to keep learning Arabic, which was a friend. Paul had a Muslim friend who although did not speak any Arabic, encouraged Paul to stay in the program. Paul said, “[He] could have been a personal influence on me choosing the study of that language.” Paul ended up taking two years of Arabic.

In summary, students’ positive experiences in and outside of the Arabic classroom encouraged them to continue learning Arabic and stay in the program. Many students thought that the Arabic classroom was engaging and interactive. They liked how they were able to work in groups and learn from each other most of the time. They thought that the classroom environment was supportive in a way that they were not afraid to make mistakes while they were learning as everyone in the class was trying to help. On the other hand, some of the participants placed emphasis on the outside of classroom experiences such as going to academic or social activities (e.g., gym, Starbucks, or library). They felt happy with each other company and wanted such feeling to continue. Therefore, the social factor represented by good experiences that students had during their journey of learning Arabic emerged as another factor that made students stay in the Arabic program.

### ***Theme 3: The teacher was a deciding factor for students to continue***

Mary ranked teacher as the second-highest influencing factor for her to continue learning Arabic at college. She felt that the teacher and students built up a relationship in a way that everyone in the class enjoyed learning the language. She said,

[The Arabic teacher] was such a good professor... we loved learning because [he] was so passionate about it. He cared about us as people, not just as information pots receiving the information that he gave us. He made it so much more fun than I think it could have been.

Answering the question, “What did the teacher do well in the class?” Mary thought that the teacher did many good things including not putting a lot of pressure on students right away in the first semester, creating an open space for everyone to make mistakes without being criticized or judged, and making an engaging learning environment where students enjoyed learning the language. When Mary heard from a friend, who was enrolled in a different language program, that he was not having a good language experience, she shared some stories with him about her language class and praised the Arabic teacher for his role in making such good Arabic classes for students.

James continued mainly because of the teacher’s teaching and personality. He thought that the teacher’s personality perfectly served to teach and that his teaching style was very good. He liked how the teacher taught the class, assigned tasks, and conducted quizzes. Answering the question, “what made you want to continue?” he said:

[After] I passed the first year... I could already put that on a resume ... So anything past that year requirement was only because I enjoyed [the professor’s teaching]. I could have taken any other classes and done just as well or better... but I stayed because I liked [the teacher].

Although James enjoyed all the courses he had taken, the Arabic classes were not easy. He said, “[the teacher] kept me on my toes and tried to make me pay attention in class and understand what I was doing.” He also thought that the teacher encouraged group work and maintained a

learning environment where everyone felt comfortable in the class, which facilitated learning Arabic. James liked how he was able to meet the teacher outside of class (i.e., campus office) and ask questions about Arabic and the Middle Eastern culture. In his opinion, the teacher was understanding and cared about his students. For example, the teacher would often permit him to miss a class on the day when he had to travel for a task match for the college.

Sara liked how the teacher paced the class, which was not too fast nor too slow. She liked how students in her Arabic class were moving on with a good amount of linguistic competence. She said, “[learning Arabic] wasn't too fast because if it had been too fast, it would've just been almost impossible to learn efficiently.” She added, “I think the breakdown of each chapter taking the time that we needed to read the paragraphs at the end of each chapter and making sure we were all pronouncing it right...I think that helped us to learn quickly.” She liked how the teacher gave informational feedback correcting her mistakes without being harsh on her. Sara also thought that the teacher was a fair grader and available outside of class holding office hours where she would come by to ask questions and seek help.

Linda liked how the teacher provided context for learning the language such as some cultural backgrounds of the target topics. She said, “[the teacher was] ready to take a step back and go more in-depth in certain contexts... and going at the student's pace to make sure that we understood everything.” She also thought that the teacher was good at “doing small groups of people and providing a constructive learning environment where we were able to ask questions and have meaningful discussions about the language and what we were learning and everything was taught very comprehensively.”

Like Sara, she thought that the teacher was good at taking the course at a medium pace, which helped everyone in the class be able to grasp what was going on and better understand the

tasks and assignments. She also liked how the teacher made accommodations for students extending assignment deadlines whenever needed and necessary. She said, “We were able to really ask questions whenever we needed to, and get more information on something or clarification on specific points of the language.”

One of the factors that encouraged Paul to continue was the teacher. Paul thought that the teacher acted as a facilitator in the class giving instructions while people were learning on their own. He said,

I really liked [the teacher]. He was easygoing, understanding, answered questions, very patient. If we were struggling, [He was] very patient in teaching us, which I think is a very good sign for a language teacher. He was very good at giving instructions and laying out expectations. He would say what he wanted and meant what he said.

Like James, Sara, and Paul, Karen thought that the teacher was a deciding factor for her to continue learning Arabic. Before she signed up for any Arabic classes, she asked others about the teacher and heard positive news. After she enrolled, she found that what they said was true. She said, “That was something that I sensed every time I was in the room where I always felt safe, practicing and learning this language, and that kept me in the program for the full time.”

Answering the question, “what did the teacher do well in the classroom?” she said, “I think that incorporating movement and community into the classroom was something that [the teacher] did really well that facilitated my learning.” She thought that the teacher was patient, encouraging, caring, and made sure that everyone was progressing in the language. She liked how the teacher cultivated a classroom environment where she felt safe in learning a new language, “It was the professor introduces content, students practice with each other, and everybody learns together.” She also liked how the teacher was clear in setting expectations and

how he made sure that students understood the content before they moved on, “Feeling [we] are actually understanding content is the most motivating thing.”

In summary, participants thought that the teacher was one of the motivating factors that shaped their decisions to continue learning Arabic. They thought that the teacher was patient, understanding, and caring and was able to create a supportive learning environment where they felt comfortable learning Arabic. They thought the teacher prepared engaging activities, helped them to work with each other and made sure that they were learning and progressing in the language. Therefore, the teacher theme emerged as another main factor for students to continue.

***Theme 4: Students wanted to be competent in the language so that they would meet future job requirements and be able to do the work efficiently***

Sara’s want to work in the Middle East was a major motivation to continue learning Arabic. During the spring semester of the first year and the fall semester of the second year, Sara wanted to do Peace Corp Prep so that she would get a certification to apply to be in the Peace Corps. She thought that taking more classes in Arabic would be necessary for her plans. She said,

This motivated me more to try to learn the language as efficiently and quickly as possible, so that if I had the opportunity to go to the Middle Eastern and North Africa right out of college, I would have the language down.

Over the past summer, Sara had an internship with an organization in Chicago, which had an international branch in an Arab country. She was able to work with them remotely. Learning Arabic was so helpful to her even although she was only in the elementary level of Arabic. Sara knew that learning Arabic was so important for her in doing humanitarian work. She said,

“working with the Middle Eastern branch was so helpful and eye-opening, and [I was able to see] how learning Arabic could influence my career.”

Like Sara, James was motivated to continue mainly for job reasons. James wanted to work for the federal government. Although he originally thought that having Arabic, as a critical foreign language, on his resume would help in raising his chances to secure a job, he also wanted to be able to speak Arabic well, write formal emails, understand different dialects, and translate from Arabic to English and vice versa. James continued because he knew that one course in Arabic was not enough to learn Arabic efficiently. He finally ended up taking two years of Arabic courses.

Linda considered the career motivation as a major factor for her to continue learning Arabic as well. Like James, She knew one course in Arabic was not enough to reach fluency in Arabic. She did not want to say that she spoke Arabic when she was not actually fluent. She said, “I studied Arabic to actually not just put Arabic on a resume but actually use it.” Her goal was to be competent in Arabic:

You have to be able to speak it well. I know that means consistently working on learning the language and I wanted to graduate with some sort of ability to be conversational so that I could put that on a resume and it would set me apart and actually be realistic about my skill level.

As far as a career is concerned, she wanted to work in refugee camps in an Arab country. She thought that being fluent in Arabic would make her a very attractive candidate in the job market. She said, “you can get paid more, some jobs will even allow you to continue taking the Arabic courses and pay for them while you're in those positions.” Therefore, she eventually minored in Arabic.

In summary, the three participants who initially joined the Arabic program for career purposes, continued mainly for the same reason. They knew that one course in a language was not enough to learn any language. Therefore, they continued taking as many Arabic courses as they could in order to build their linguistic efficiency and competence in the language. Therefore, the career theme was identified as another factor that motivated students to continue learning Arabic.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this evaluation study was to understand why students initially pursued Arabic language courses and continued to enroll in subsequent higher-level Arabic courses at my college. This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings as related to the literature on learning foreign languages, including enrollment and persistence in language programs. Implications for practice and recommendations for further evaluation are provided.

In this evaluation, I address two questions:

Q1. What factors influence students to join the Arabic program at my college?

Q2. What factors influence students to continue to enroll in subsequent higher-level Arabic courses?

As noted in Chapter four, eight themes emerged following analysis of data. Students joined the Arabic program for several reasons. Several indicated an interest in learning a different language (a non-romance language) and a curiosity to discover the Middle East and North African region. Some indicated an interest in seeing an alignment between learning Arabic and other relevant courses. Participants enrolled in the Arabic program due to the potential for future job opportunities. Another reason mentioned by participants was their perception that Arabic was a moderately difficult language to learn. Participants indicated that they continued to enroll in subsequent higher-level Arabic courses for a variety of reasons. Many shared that they became more interested in the language and culture after completing the elementary course in Arabic. Participants also were encouraged by the supportive learning experiences that



accompanied their learning of Arabic, and they liked the teacher's personality and teaching style. Participants also shared that they wanted to be competent in the language so that they would meet future job requirements and demands.

### **Discussion of Themes for the First Study Question**

#### ***Theme 1: Students joined the Arabic program for an interest in learning a different language (a non-romance language) and a curiosity to discover the Middle East and North African region***

Previous studies indicate that people who want to learn a foreign language are motivated by orientations (McPhee & O'Brien's, 2014) and internal and/or external factors (Williams & Burden, 1997). Orientation is the reason for studying a foreign language (Gardner and Tremblay, 1994) which is the initial motivation to get involved in an activity. There is consistency between what my participants said about their motivation to enroll and what the literature said about the integrative orientation as a significant factor for language learning motivation. Three participants in this study, signed up for Arabic courses mainly because they were interested in learning a non-romance language and curious about the Middle Eastern region/culture. Answering one of my questions, "what was your number one factor to join the Arabic program?" Mary said, "Curiosity," Paul said, "Its uniqueness." Karen said, "My interest in the language." The other three participants brought up this factor during their speech and referred to it as a significant one. The interest in a different language and culture factor (Brosh, 2013; Winke & Weger-Guntharp, 2006) seemed to be one of the big factors for students to join the Arabic program and pursue learning Arabic. Most participants ranked the integrative orientation (e.g., interest in a foreign language) at the top of factors to enroll. All participants wanted to stay away from Romance

languages (widely taught languages in the US) and did not want to continue with the languages they learned in high school.

Curiosity triggers motivation (Williams and Burden, 1997); therefore, the interest in Arab culture, politics, religion, and history acted as triggers that stimulated motivation for some participants to join the Arabic program. For example, Mary and James wanted to discover the Middle Eastern culture; Paul was more interested in ancient history; Karen wanted to know about Islam through Arabic. For some participants, curiosity was triggered by other factors such as people. Awad (2014) argues that support from family and friends and early exposure to a foreign language influences students' decision to enroll. Arabic became an option to Mary when a friend of hers told her positive learning experiences he had in a summer language program. The same occurred for Sara but through her father who told her interesting stories from his trips to the Middle East.

***Theme 2: Students joined the Arabic program for seeing an alignment between learning Arabic and other relevant courses***

Students are inclined to learn a language that aligns with their academic area of study (Winke & Weger-Guntharp, 2006). The evaluation findings support the previous research which indicated that understanding the Middle East politics (Husseinali, 2006), religions (Winke & Weger-Guntharp, 2006), and history (Brosh, 2013) are among the reasons why Americans learn Arabic. Winke & Weger-Guntharp (2006) found that academic motivation (e.g., learning a language that dominates an academic area of study) is a significant reason (number 5 out of 10 reasons) for students to choose Arabic trying to enhance their understanding of the Middle East. Four participants in this study thought that learning Arabic would inform their understanding of other relevant courses. For example, James thought learning Arabic was a logical decision since

he was majoring in political science; Karen wanted to inform her understanding of Islam; Linda wanted to understand the area culturally and politically whereas Paul was interested in ancient Arab history.

Research also refers to the potential gains people seek to obtain by involving in an activity as instrumental orientation (Lin & Warschauer, 2011). Lin and Warschauer (2011) define instrumental orientation as, “the potential pragmatic gains of L2 proficiency, such as to get a better job or to pass a required examination” (p. 59). Therefore, most participants in this study joined the Arabic program motivated by a desire to obtain gains from enrolling in the Arabic program.

### ***Theme 3: Students joined the Arabic program for future Job opportunities***

Many college students are career-oriented and attribute economic utility to learn the language (Brosh, 2013) which becomes a source of motivation to study a language. The idea of working in the Middle East or finding jobs related to the Arabic language in the United States became attractive to many Americans as the value of Arabic grew throughout the modern era (Brosh, 2013). The career’s purpose was obviously a big motivation for some participants in this evaluation to join the Arabic courses. Three participants ranked career purpose as the number one factor to choose Arabic. They were aware that Arabic could lead to promising future employment and decided to join the Arabic program for that reason. When participants in this study referred to Arabic, they often used phrases such as, “a critical language,” “less common language,” and “unique language.” They were aware that having Arabic on the resume would increase their chances to obtain desirable jobs in the U.S. government, U.N. institutions, or various global humanitarian organizations. Therefore, this theme aligns with previous studies (Belnap, 1987; Brosh, 2013; Winke & Weger-Guntharp, 2006) which emphasized the value of

the career purpose as a motivational factor for students to learn a language.

***Theme 4: Students joined the Arabic program for thinking that Arabic was a moderately difficult language to learn***

Previous studies often refer to Arabic as a difficult language to learn for Americans (Husseinali, 2006). The United States Foreign Service Institute (FSI) ranked foreign languages into four groups, based on the amount of time required to reach a certain proficiency, placing Arabic in the fourth group which contains the hardest languages to learn along with Chinese, Korean and Japanese (Stevens, 2006). The source of difficulty comes from the fact that Arabic is a Semitic language unlike English, Spanish, and French which are Indo-European languages (Stevens, 2006). Many participants in this study admitted that they perceived Arabic as a difficult language to learn before enrolling in the Arabic program. They did not enroll in the Arabic courses before having this attitude changed. The change in attitude occurred when participants asked former Arabic students about the program. For example, Karen took some time to look up reviews that past students had left about the Arabic classes and added Arabic to her schedule only after she felt that Arabic was in the medium level of difficulty. Previous literature supports the claim that a change in negative beliefs about Arabic difficulty to positive ones is possible (Rashed, 2013).

In the light of literature, this theme partly aligns with my finding in the fact that Arabic is often perceived as a hard language to learn by Americans (Husseinali, 2006; Stevens, 2006) and that negative attitudes are changeable (Rashed, 2013). However, it partly does not align with previous studies in a way that participants in this study placed Arabic in the medium level of difficulty ranking it under Chinese and Japanese and above Spanish and French.

## **Discussion of Themes for the Second Study Question**

### ***Theme 1: Students became more interested in the language and culture after completing the elementary course in Arabic***

Interest in a language and developing a passion for it influence students' decisions and persistence. Students continue learning foreign languages for different reasons among them is developing a passion for the language (Awad, 2014) and having an interest in the culture (Brosh, 2013; Winke & Weger-Guntharp, 2006). The enjoyment element in the learning process also motivates students to persist in learning a language (Winke & Weger-Guntharp, 2006). In this study, participants' interest in learning Arabic seemed to increase as they progressed in the language. They felt that there was a lot more to learn in the next semesters to come. Many of them enjoyed learning Arabic and were glad to be in the class. By the end of the first semester, students developed a good understanding of the basic Arabic culture through reading and discussing the cultural sections provided in each chapter in the textbook. All participants expressed that they were enthusiastic to sign up for the next Arabic courses.

Elements such as plans to travel (Husseinali, 2006; Winke, & Weger-Guntharp, 2006), conversational partner opportunities (Sato and Miller, 2021) seemed to increase student motivation to learn Arabic. Three of the participants in this evaluation mentioned that they developed plans to travel to Arab-speaking countries and they eventually did. The conversational partner opportunities were seen as encouraging and very useful. Many of the participants spoke highly of the events organized by the Arabic program on-campus (e.g., the Arabic dinner event). They thought that such events were excellent opportunities for them to practice the language with native speakers and to learn more about the culture. Therefore, this theme aligns with previous studies.

***Theme 2: The supportive learning experiences encouraged students to continue to enroll in Arabic courses***

The social factor represented by positive experiences emerged as an influencing factor that made students persist. Previous studies show that active learning environment created by the teacher in the classroom contributes to student's persistence and choosing to continue (Awad, 2014). Participants in this study thought that the Arabic classroom was interactive, engaging, and supportive and liked how they were able to work in groups and learn from each other most of the time. They were not afraid to make mistakes in front of other students. Awad (2014) found that students value learning accompanied by fun activities. In this evaluation, Mary, James, Sara, and Paul emphasized that they enjoyed learning with others and liked the classroom activities. Williams and Burden (1997) suggested that teachers should build up a supportive learning environment for their students. Participants agreed that the Arabic teacher succeeded to create an engaging environment for all to learn and progress. Mary ranked the social aspect of the learning experience (i.e. socializing with friends in and out of the classroom) as a number one factor for her to continue learning Arabic while others thought that the classroom environment was a big factor for them to stay in the program

Awad (2014) also found that support from family, peers, friends is a motivating element in learning persistence. This aligns with the evaluation findings that James made relationships with many classmates, which eventually ended up in a form of friendship, which motivated him to continue. Likewise, students' positive experiences outside of the Arabic classroom seemed to be significant for students to stay in the program. Some participants placed emphasis on their experiences outside of the classroom such as going to academic or social activities (e.g., gym, Starbucks, or library) with other peers. They felt happy with each other company and wanted

such feeling to continue. This study's finding is in line with the literature that links persistence and positive learning experiences.

***Theme 3: The teacher was a deciding factor for students to continue***

Previous studies agree on the role of the teacher in influencing students' decision to continue their learning a foreign language (Al Alili & Hassan, 2017; Dajani et al., 2014). Dajani et al. (2013) argue that a teacher should be prepared for classes, design engaging learning activities, and able to energize students and make their learning enjoyable. Participants in this study thought that the Arabic teacher was patient, understanding, and caring and was able to create a supportive learning environment. For example, James continued mainly because he liked the teacher's personality and teaching style. For him, the teacher was the number one influencing factor to continue learning Arabic. Other participants thought that the teacher acted as a facilitator in the class, a fair grader, and available outside of class to offer help and answer questions.

Previous studies also illustrated that a good language teacher needs to possess certain skills and qualities such as patience, consistency, and the ability to create a dynamic engaging classroom (Awad, 2014). Efficiency in teaching, preparation, organization, activity planning, flexibility, enthusiasm, confidence, and honesty are characteristics of a good language teacher (Aladdin, 2014). Therefore, the teacher theme in this study aligns with previous studies, which indicated that teachers foster students' motivation to persist.

***Theme 4: Students wanted to be competent in the language so that they would meet future job requirements and be able to do the work efficiently***

Those students who initially enrolled in the Arabic program for career orientation continued mainly for the same reason. This finding supports previous research. Employment/job purpose is

the main factor for students to learn Arabic (Winke & Weger-Guntharp, 2006). The three students, James, Sara, and Linda who ranked the job factor as the number one reason to join the Arabic program seemed to keep this factor as number one for continuing learning Arabic. This theme aligns with previous studies, which show that many students are career-oriented and study Arabic for future job purposes (Belnap, 1987; Brosh, 2013).

### **My Appreciation of the Joy in Building a Cohesive Community**

Participants spoke highly of how the teacher succeeded in building a cohesive community in their Arabic classrooms. Although the participants were in different levels of Arabic and different years of enrollment, they described their learning experiences as positive, fruitful, and unique. They thought that the Arabic teacher enhanced a sense of belonging to the Arabic classes and program by establishing a friendly environment between students who felt that the class was designed for the whole group to move along together and progress together. This was made by encouraging teamwork groups in and out of the classroom. They were asked to help each other finding answers to questions and share ideas. They learned that helping each other, learning from each other, and giving feedback to one another was the best way to succeed and achieve the class goals (e.g., reaching fluency in Arabic).

I was satisfied and feeling content seeing my students excited about doing their classroom tasks and activities. I knew that they were having fun while learning. I was glad to see them excited to move their chairs around, sit in circles, and start working in small groups as a coherent community. I was able to tell that these moments were among their favorites in the class. The remarks they gave to each other, their laughter, and their whispers were signs of harmony and learning. I was delighted to see them attend social events organized by the Arabic program in groups. They knew each other and made friends with one another. They felt that they



were in the same boat and were happy to take this journey. Participants happily shared such experiences expressing that the teacher was the one who cultivated such a positive environment in and out of the classroom.

### **Implications for Practice**

This evaluation incorporated principles of appreciative inquiry. The implications for practice in this study, therefore, would focus on the strengths and positive practices in the Arabic program at my college. The findings suggest that students who took courses in Middle Eastern studies, history, politics, and religion are more inclined to join the Arabic program and persist in learning the language. A liaison between the Arabic program and other relevant programs may help to increase student enrollment and retention in the Arabic program. Additionally, there could be a collaboration between the Arabic program and these related programs through planned and organized mutual activities and events. For example, guest speaker opportunities are among the practices that might be initiated and fostered. The Arabic teacher and/or former students in the Arabic programs could give speeches on campus and in some other Arabic relevant courses to provide students with more information about the Arabic language, the job possibilities after graduation, and the Middle Eastern region and culture.

Conversational partner opportunities in this study appeared to be very significant on campus and had a notable influence on students' motivation to stay in the program and enhance their learning. Sato and Miller (2021) found that American students did not only focus on the language proficiency aspect of learning during conversational partner meetings with their international conversational counterparts, but also sought common hobbies and interests with them aiming for developing social relationships, which seemed to be very valuable to enhance learning experiences. The Arabic program at my college organizes conversational partner

meetings which aim to raise students' fluency and competence in Arabic. Such activity may be conducted on a regular basis, given more attention, and expanded for the continued development of students' language mastery and cultural understanding. These conversational experiences, which are traditionally conducted face to face, could also occur online.

Finally, all participants praised the activities performed on campus through the Arabic club. They thought that activities on campus within the context of Arabic were excellent occasions for social gatherings, building a sense of belonging, learning, and understanding different cultures. Participants shared that they enjoyed the Arabic dinner event on campus where they could meet with students from different disciplines. Students who feel that they belong to a specific group are more likely to persist and the sense of belonging, in this case, acts as a source of motivation to the group (Tinto, 2017). My participants liked seeing the Arab students with whom they spoke Arabic most of the time there. More planning, organization, and attention could be given to those already established events. Other events and activities could be added. For example, Arabic coffee/tea hour activity can be initiated and held regularly such as once a week, which could be another opportunity for students to meet and talk.

Students talked highly of the supportive community in the Arabic classrooms, which facilitated their learning and outcomes. I plan to build on this finding. The next steps for me to do, for example, is to invite some native speakers of Arabic, who are learning English on campus, to sit in the Arabic classes and do learning activities with my students occasionally, in Arabic and English, including tasks in speaking, writing, and reading. They will be encouraged to teach each other, learn from each other, and give feedback to one another. I can also invite former Arabic students who traveled to Arabic-speaking countries to come and share their stories and positive experiences with my students.

## **Limitations**

I have interviewed the first six people who responded to my recruitment email. The statements provided are representative of those students who responded and most likely those interviewees were motivated to participate and have positive feelings to share in this study. Students with less than positive feelings may not have opted to participate, so their perspectives are not known—if they exist. I also asked my participant pre-planned questions (i.e., interview questions), which meant finding answers to my two evaluation questions. I was able to obtain large data filled up with patterns, similar ideas, and examples. My data reached saturation. My study cannot answer every question, but it does answer the evaluation study questions posed.

The concurrent role of the teacher and evaluator at the same time might be another limitation. In this study, the evaluator is the former teacher to participants. This fact may discourage some of the participants to share what they want to say openly or with no hesitation. They may be conservative when it comes to sharing negative feelings towards the Arabic program or learning the Arabic language.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

One of the evaluation findings is that the teacher is an essential element in shaping students' decisions to continue learning a language. I recommend conducting a qualitative study interviewing some foreign language teachers on campus trying to understand what they are doing well in the programs that help them increase student enrollment and sustain it.

## **Conclusion**

This evaluation study investigated the factors that influenced student enrollment and retention in the Arabic program at my college. I approached this investigation through an

appreciative inquiry lens, which focus on the strengths and what worked well rather than focusing on the pitfalls and weakness in a system.

I found that participants join the Arabic programs for different factors. The most common factor seemed to be students' interest in learning a different language (non-romance language). Students wanted to stay away from the widely taught languages in the U.S. such as Spanish and French. This interest in the language was accompanied by a desire to discover the Arab culture (i.e., traditions, values, norms, food, and music). Many students wanted to inform their understanding of other courses they were taking in Middle Eastern studies, history, and religion. They thought that learning Arabic was compatible with such courses and went along together. Most students thought that Arabic was not as hard as Japanese and Chinese so they were more encouraged to enroll in Arabic courses. Some students were mainly career-oriented; therefore, they joined the Arabic program largely because they had in mind that learning a critical language in the U.S. would help them secure good jobs in the future.

Participants seemed to continue to enroll in subsequent courses in the Arabic program for four factors. Students' interest in the language increased after they finished the elementary courses in the program. They felt that there was a lot more to learn in the coming semesters and they disregard any ideas to discontinue. They also stayed in the program because they liked the positive experiences the Arabic program provided. The social factor appeared to be the factor that stimulated students to continue. Students seemed to have a positive environment in the classroom where they liked the social aspect of the class. They also seemed to enjoy outside Arabic-related experiences such as going to events together. Students did not want to lose such company by not continuing. The teacher appeared to be a motivating factor for students to continue learning Arabic. Students appreciated how the teacher was understanding and caring.

Finally, career-oriented students who in the first place enrolled in the Arabic program for job reasons seemed to have this factor as the number one motivating factor to continue learning Arabic.

This evaluation may help the Arabic program improve. The investigator found out many strengths in the program on which he can build on and expand. He found that many students were more inclined to enroll in non-romance languages; therefore, he might start to advertise more for the Arabic program on campus through activities, flyers, and giving speeches in other classes, which may increase enrollment. There can be a sort of collaboration between the Arabic program and other relevant programs, which could attract students to the Arabic program. The Arabic events on campus appeared to be a source of motivation, interaction, and enjoyment, and such events could be enhanced, fostered, and expanded.

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## Appendix A: 2016 Fall Language Enrollments and Percentage Change in the United States Institutions of Higher Education

**Table A1.** The MLA Report

Language	2006	2009	2006-09 % Change	2013	2009-13 % Change	2016	2013-16 % Change
Spanish	822,148	861,015	4.7	789,888	-8.3	712,240	-9.8
French	206,019	215,244	4.5	197,679	-8.2	175,667	-11.1
American Sign Language	79,744	92,068	15.5	109,567	19.0	107,060	-2.3
German	94,146	95,613	1.6	86,782	-9.2	80,594	-7.1
Japanese	65,410	72,357	10.6	66,771	-7.7	68,810	3.1
Italian	78,176	80,322	2.7	70,982	-11.6	56,743	-20.1
Chinese	51,382	59,876	16.5	61,084	2.0	53,069	-13.1
Arabic <sup>1</sup>	24,010	35,228	46.7	33,526	-4.8	31,554	-5.9
Latin	32,164	32,446	0.9	27,209	-16.1	24,866	-8.6
Russian	24,784	26,740	7.9	21,979	-17.8	20,353	-7.4
Korean	7,146	8,449	18.2	12,256	45.1	13,936	13.7
Greek, Ancient	22,842	21,515	5.8	16,961	-21.2	13,264	-21.8
Portuguese	10,310	11,273	-9.3	12,407	10.1	9,827	-20.8
Hebrew, Biblical	14,137	13,764	-2.6	12,596	-8.5	9,587	-23.9
Hebrew, Modern	9,620	8,307	-13.6	6,698	-19.4	5,521	-17.6
Other Languages	33,800	39,349	16.4	34,746	-11.7	34,830	0.2
Total	1,575,838	1,673,566	6.2	1,561,131	-6.7	1,417,921	-9.2



## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Study Questions	Data Source	Interview Questions
<p>Q1. What factors influence students to join the Arabic program at my college?</p>	<p>Student Interview</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What made you decide to enroll in the Arabic language program?</li> <li>2. Why did you choose to learn Arabic, not any other language?</li> <li>3. What factors influenced your decision to sign up for Arabic 101, the first course in the Arabic sequence? Which of these factors were the most important?</li> <li>4. What factors influenced your decision to continue learning Arabic or take more courses in Arabic?</li> </ol>
<p>Q2. What factors influence students to continue to enroll in subsequent higher-level Arabic courses?</p>	<p>Student Interview</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. What attitudes did you hold toward the Arabic language before you enrolled in the Arabic program? How did such attitudes affect your choice to enroll?</li> <li>6. What personal factors (such as experiences, interests, beliefs, family, and friends) were influential in motivating you to study Arabic? How were these factors (interests, beliefs, etc.) developed?</li> <li>7. How did organizational factors/ college-related factors (such as advising, mentoring and/or publicity about the Arabic program) influence your decision to enroll or continue?</li> <li>8. What has the instructor done well that motivated you to study Arabic?</li> <li>9. How did subject-related factors (such as Arabic unique characteristics, classroom setting, and/or classroom activities) influence your decision to continue?</li> </ol>