

ISLAMIC CULTURE IN THE CURRICULA OF ARABIC AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Abdelrahman Musa Abakar

Introduction

Arabic is taught and learned in Islamic societies as a means towards a better understanding of the Holy book, the Qur'ân, and the affiliated sciences of Islamic heritage. During the different phases of Islamic history, Arab as well as non-Arab Muslims did their best to study Arabic and Islamic sciences. The great Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyyah indicates in this regard that "those who dealt with the Islamic science from Persia did so by studying the religion and other prerogatives including Arabic" (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1996:26).

Today, Arabic is an essential component of the general education curriculum in most Islamic societies. At the tertiary level, Arabic is also taught to students from different disciplines, interested in Islam and Middle Eastern Studies but, in particular, to students of Islamic studies because a thorough knowledge of the language is a condition *sine qua non* for a profound understanding of Islam. Accordingly, the Arabic language curricula addressed to students at this level have to take into account not only the language but the culture as well.

The Scope of the Paper

This paper aims at drawing the broad outlines for a general Arabic language curriculum for students of Islamic studies and Islamic education who are speakers of languages other than Arabic. It is a general language curriculum where components of Islamic culture and language items are introduced. My contention is that such a language curriculum is primarily a general language education curriculum because it aims at attaining the following objectives:

1. To help students to acquire language-learning techniques, therefore a means to give the learner the opportunity to achieve his own goals from learning Arabic.
2. To offer insights into the language and culture, therefore a means to understand Islamic culture in general, but more specifically Islamic thought, Islamic education and Islamic legal and judicial institutions.

3. To provide students with a tool for the study of Arabic language and Islam, therefore a means to decipher and decode religious texts and treatises.

In order to fulfil these goals, the curriculum must imperatively include a component of Islamic culture and civilisation.

The Concept of Culture

As a concept, culture is notoriously difficult to define. Confronted with this monumental task, Melville Herskovits defined culture as “a construct that describes the total body of belief, behaviour, knowledge, sanctions, values and goals that mark the way of life of any people.” (Melville Herskovits 1948: 625). Later on, Seelye described culture as “a broad concept that embraces all the aspects of the life of man” (Seelye 1984:26). And recently Salzman has written, “Taken comprehensively, it is understood to refer to the total pattern of human behaviour transmitted from generation to generation” (Salzman 1998:46).

It is clear then that these definitions, which deal with culture from the point of view of anthropology and sociology, are vague and suggest that the concept of culture is fluid. Within a society, it can include material artifacts, behaviours and social expectations, including norms and values.

As early as the 1950s when specialists in the field of language education made a case for culture teaching in language curricula, they were also confronted with the vagueness of the concept of culture. At that time, language teachers, apparently under the growing influence of social sciences, tended to include history, geography, institutions and the accomplishments of the target language community as a necessary element of language teaching. This concept of “Olympian Culture” is still the dominant trend in teaching French as a foreign language.

Later on, another concept of culture emerged; it laid emphasis on what is often referred to as *la maniere de vivre* or way of life of a community. It refers to the typical behaviour in daily situations, personal relationships, family life, value systems or “the whole of the shared social fabric that makes up a society” (Stern 1993: 206).

Meanwhile, writers like Brooks (1996:90-92), Chastain (1988:389-95) and Nostrand (1978) tried to reduce the vast and amorphous nature of the concept to manageable proportions by preparing lists of items to be included in the component of language curricula. However, most of the suggested schemes are not easy to apply because they require factual information which language teachers cannot obtain without a resource guide.

Hammerly (1982:510-516) has also suggested a threefold classification where he drew a distinction between information (or factual culture), behavioural culture and achievement (or accomplishment) culture. These classifications cover a wide range of topics but have the merit of bringing together the humanistic and anthropological aspects of culture. He has also attempted to divide these aspects into a number of categories in

order to adjust them to the needs of the learner. It is to be stated here that the writers cited above have adopted different approaches to embrace the concept of culture but they all agree that language learners should come as close as possible to the people who use the language, their way of life, thought, aspirations and common goals. It is this reality of people and places that constitutes the specific contribution of culture to language curricula. Nevertheless, this reality manifests itself also in the language. Therefore, the "linguistic manifestations" of culture should also be taken into consideration.

In fine, the role of culture and language in the curriculum are complementary and a subtle mixture of the two is a necessity in order to fulfil the needs of the learner.

At this point, it seems instructive to underline the specificity of the concept of culture in an Arabic language curriculum. In fact, the question that arises here is whether we have to include in the curriculum a component of Arabic culture, Islamic culture or Arab Islamic culture?

The Arabic language defines *thaqāfah* (culture) as dexterity and cleverness. It means also to "learn to know". The term, in our times, is devoted to the type of education through which methods of thinking and working can grow in a manner suiting the time and the place. It is needless to say that thought, science and creativity in arts are the basic components of culture. Before the revelation of the Islamic message, the Arabs had a distinctive culture. Throughout the ages, this culture has developed, incorporating Islamic elements and values. However, since the early decades of the twentieth century, many scholars of Arabic culture have rejected any linkage between religion and culture and advocate that thinking, science and arts must be emancipated and rendered devoid of any external theology in order to emancipate mankind from illusions and backwardness. They define Arab culture as that which emerged and developed in the Arab Peninsula before the Islamic revelation. All the Arab cultural accomplishments, especially in the field of poetry, are referred to as "pre-Islamic" or pertaining to the *Jāhiliyyah* (era of decadence). The term has negative connotations and the achievements of the Arabs during that period are not considered a model to be followed or glorified, at least from the Islamic point of view. (See Al-Qardawi, 1994:13). It goes without saying that the opponents of this position, namely, the nationalists and the modernists, do not adhere to this point of view and many among them often turn to their glorious past, including the pre-Islamic period, with pride and dignity.

However, their opponents differ. They believe that Islam requires that the Muslim individual develop his culture in accordance with his creed so as to avoid the occurrence of any discrepancies between culture and religion and to protect the oneness of a Muslim's identity. Moreover, they claim that it is difficult to perceive any culture that is not linked to a historic or doctrinal background that determines its precepts and values.

Rather they prefer the term "Islamic culture" which is wide enough to incorporate religious, ideological and civilisational values of Islam. According to the proponents of this trend, Islamic culture must be based on

the Holy Book, the Qur'ân, the tradition of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and the legal, economic and political principles agreed upon unanimously by the *Fiqh* schools and the righteous predecessors.

Proceeding from the above, one has to admit that constraints may emerge if we attempt to adopt the term "Arab culture" because, in the first place, the term in itself is very restrictive. In the second place, native speakers of Arabic from the linguistic point of view, do not constitute a homogenous group. Today, the Arab world harbours diverse ethnic groups and cultures and one should not ignore the fact that all Arabs are not Muslims. It is clear, then, that if we confine ourselves to the term "Arabic culture", the account of any aspect of the life of the language community that one can present in the curriculum, may not reflect the realities of the language nor that of its speakers.

Nevertheless, Arabic is greatly indebted to Islam for its diffusion in various parts of the globe. The language has experienced a continuous process of innovation and enrichment by Islamic legal and religious terms. We must concede, then, that the term "Islamic culture" is more comprehensive and can accommodate Islamic cultures of diverse origins.

Islam has spread all over the globe to cover Arab and non-Arab countries. Since the early days of Islam, Arabs and Arabic (the language of the Qur'ân) have constituted the core of Islamic culture. The non-Arabs who mastered the language and became versed in Islamic studies were vocal representatives of Islamic culture. A non-exhaustive list of these scholars may include the reputed grammarian Sibawayh (Othman Ibn Ganbar), the specialist in jurisprudence and linguist Alrazy (Ahmad Ibn Hamdan) and the mathematician Al-Khawarizmy (Mohammed Ibn Musa).

Accordingly, the use of "Arab" and "Islamic" culture in this paper, as two interchangeable terms, seems in many instances to be acceptable.

Culture Teaching Objectives

Learning a society's culture is critical to human development. By learning the morals and values of a society, a child may be transformed from an egocentric savage to a responsible, civilised human being. This most remarkable change may occur in only a few years. (Fine 1996:21).

Meanwhile, different societies have different objectives in bringing up the child and the youth. Social scientists agree that one of the main aspects of culture is diversity. Behaviour and norms that are appropriate in one society are inappropriate in others. For this reason, it is important to draw a distinction between cultural relativism and cultural absolutism. In this regard, Islamic culture is invariable in respect of the absolute sources and creeds, laws and methodologies contained therein. Nevertheless, it is variable in respect of the individual Muslim's ability to create, and his endeavours and achievements in different environments, times and places. The absolutism of Islamic culture emanates from a divine source which is infallible. Allah is one, and His message will always be one and harmonious in all its teachings, commandments and prohibitions. The objective of the Islamic culture is to guide the individual to the right path. This guidance can

be achieved by the following:

1. Inculcating in the Muslim individual a conscious conception that the universe is the creation of God and that it evolves in accordance with his Will, in full harmony and coherent unity, that life is a manifestation of God's supreme power and that man is the "vicegerent of God on Earth".
2. Creating a sense of awareness in the Muslim individual of his human rights so that he will not forsake those attributes which almighty Allah has secured for him as indisputable rights.
3. Persuading the Muslim to comply with all injunctions and prohibitions by Allah Almighty and apply Islamic law in the fields of worship, transactions, rights and other aspects of life.
4. Convincing the Muslim to adopt all commendable qualities as prescribed by Islam for the individual (such as honesty, patience, courage, benevolence, altruism etc.) and to avoid depravities (such as backbiting, defamation, envy, meanness, greed, etc.).
5. Preaching openness to constructive solidarity with other Muslims and also with mankind in general, and working for the fulfilment of man's desirable goals. (See *la strategie culturelle du monde islamique*, ISESCO: 1997).

There is no doubt that this is a very ambitious list of objectives and no curriculum designer can pretend to be able to include all these items in a language curriculum. However, they constitute a framework for our choice of culture themes to be dealt with in the Arabic language curriculum.

Meanwhile, Stern notes that most of the writers who have attempted to specify culture teaching objectives have agreed that the overall objectives of culture teaching are cross-cultural understanding and cross-cultural communication (Stern 1993:214). He also provides an excellent synthesis of the works of Valette (1977), Hammerly (1982), Seelye (1984) and Robinson (1984) on the subject and concludes that in spite of differences in terminology and emphasis, there is a consensus on a number of objectives:

First, the cognitive goals of culture learning are underlined. They mean knowledge about the target culture and its characteristics and a willingness to compare the target culture and the learner's own culture, to analyze, synthesize and generalize.

Secondly, the affective goals are also recognised. They imply interest, intellectual curiosity and empathy.

Thirdly, a behavioural component is identified. Writers suggest learners must be able to recognise culturally relevant behaviour and conduct themselves accordingly.

It is clear then that the theorists of culture teaching suggest a shift from an emphasis on language competence or proficiency to a cognitive orientation in the teaching of culture. But since each curriculum makes its own demands and pursue specific goals, it seems more appropriate to underline the specific objectives of teaching Islamic culture i.e. culture awareness and language proficiency. It goes without saying that in this specific context, both factors are interdependent and complementary.

Cultural Themes in the Curriculum

One of the aims of teaching Islamic culture is to give learners as comprehensive account as possible of the given culture. In the case of Arabic, this account is supposed to be generally based on humanistic, anthropological and religious considerations. The latter point is sensitive in the light of the different interpretations of Islamic cultural phenomena. It is wise then that specialists in Islamic studies be consulted before including any item in the curriculum.

Besides, knowledge about Islamic culture as it is presented in the available resources, is in most cases encyclopedic and not geared to the specific needs of the learners. Therefore, it is necessary to contain this knowledge in manageable proportions.

Proceeding from the above, we will now attempt to suggest themes for culture teaching in the curriculum. They include the following:

(1) Places

Language learners need a sense of physical location to which to relate the language. Therefore, it is believed that an objective relation with the physical environment is crucial. In the case of Arabic, this relation is rather effectively tinged because of the religious factors. In fact, students of Arabic look with profound respect and admiration to the holy places of Islam as well as to the reputed centres of Islamic learning in the Middle East.

Topics:

Geographical location of the Arab and Islamic World

Islamic World population

Islamic ancient cities (Makkah, Medinah, Jerusalem, Cairo, Baghdad, Sanaa and Constantinople)

(2) People and Society

It is commonly believed that elements of culture incorporated in the curriculum should help the learner to identify groups indicative of the socio-professional and economic activities. The regional characteristics and differences between the speakers of the language have also to be taken

into consideration. As we have already stated, the Arab Islamic World is inhabited by diverse ethnic groups and cultures. This diversity manifests itself not only in Arabic dialects but also in the standard language or the “Modern Fuß-â”. It is a matter of finding how people view themselves in relation to speakers of other languages and their attitude towards their own language.

Topics:

The pre-eminence of the Arabic language.

The ethnic groups of the Islamic World.

Arabic Islamic proverbs (a selection of common Arab proverbs with particular reference to Qur’ân, Prophet’s sayings and Islamic tradition).

Arabic and Islamic calligraphy (an anthology of past and contemporary calligraphers and their works).

Islamic architecture.

Celebration of religious feasts and festivals.

(3) Arab Islamic History and Civilisation

History is the record of various events experienced by individuals, groups and nations throughout the ages. It stands as a mirror of the different social, economic, political and cultural aspects in the life of a nation. Islamic history, like the history of other nations, witnessed positive and negative events, break-throughs and drawbacks.

Islamic history bears witness to the adherence of Muslims during the better part of their history, to SharTM’ah laws and their remarkable success in establishing economic, social and cultural institutions. It provides evidence of the flourishing development attained by Muslims and the contribution they have made to science and arts.

The general Arabic language curriculum aims at giving learners the opportunity to know the major historic developments of Arab Islamic societies. They must also know the historically significant symbols, notable events and trends as well as historical personalities such as Muslim famous heroes, intellectuals and pioneers in many fields of knowledge, who offered valuable services to the development of mankind.

Muslims, in general, have great reverence for Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) and his caliphs who succeeded him. Learners of Arabic have also, in principle, prior and sufficient knowledge of the dynasties that reigned over the Islamic World in the early centuries of Islam because this knowledge is part of the general history curriculum taught in most parts of the Islamic World. However, this history needs, above all, to be looked at from the point of view of native speakers whose perceptions and values provide the basis necessary for the historical understanding and empathy that are needed in a language learning perspective.

Topics:

Biography of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.)
History of the early Islamic Caliphate
Caliph Umar bin Abdalaziz (from the Umayyad dynasty)
Caliph Harun Al-Rasheed (from the Abbaside dynasty)
The Islamic civilisation in Andalusia
Islamic civilisation in South East Asia
Islamic civilisation in Africa

(4) Islamic Institutions

In a culture-oriented curriculum, learners should be given an idea of the system of government, socio-economic institutions, educational systems and the media in the appropriate society. In the case of the Islamic World, these institutions are multiple and heterogeneous, so it is not an easy task to give an account of all of them. However, it is important to find an optimal mix of the learners' interests and the perceptions of Arabic language speakers of these institutions. The problem in this domain is to find accurate and well-documented information of the legal, administrative and economic systems and organisation of past and present Arab and Islamic institutions.

Topics:

Legal and financial institutions of the early Islamic caliphates
The Arab League
The Organisation of the Islamic Conference
Contemporary Islamic Banks
Islamic judicial system
Islamic endowments (*waqfs*)
Famous libraries in Islamic history
Sources of Islamic education

(5) Literary and Artistic Heritage

The Arab Islamic heritage is an outcome of the past and contemporary scientific, artistic and industrial achievements and glories of Muslims. They form a rich source not only of Islamic culture but also of human heritage. It is worth mentioning here that Islamic heritage is mainly based on the spirit and purposes of Islam, its dogmas and basic components. Therefore, in the Islamic cultural heritage, there is no room for the materialistic, secular or positivistic laws nor for many of the doctrines and ideologies that do not recognise the heavenly laws as their source and reference.

Now, within the frame of a cultural curriculum, learners have to acquire knowledge about and appreciation of Arabic and Islamic literary works which are common knowledge and constitute a heritage of "common literacy" (Stern, 1992: 221).

However, if learners have interest beyond this stage, in literature and

the arts, they have to be encouraged to continue learning from a particular cultural and literary perspective. It is obvious that in most Arabic language or Middle East studies departments, students are offered a number of courses in Arabic and Islamic literature illustrating the arts during different periods of Islamic history. They also study courses in rhetoric, poetry and stylistics.

Topics:

Arab Islamic oratory arts
Islamic philosophers
Apostolic arts
Ancient and contemporary Arab Islamic novels and novelists
Arab Islamic poetry
Arab Islamic drama and theatre

(6) Islamic Sciences

Writings in Islamic sciences constitute a vital source of Islamic culture. The most salient features of these writings are abundance, creativity and diversity. The Holy Qur'ân is the basis of and reference of Islamic sciences, and the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), (the Sunnah or tradition) offer explanation and provide details of the many rules of worship and transactions. The main target of this part of the curriculum is to enable learners of Arabic to understand these texts which are written primarily in Arabic, the vessel of Islamic studies. The idea here is to provide learners with a variety of texts in different branches of Islamic sciences reflecting the differences between them in terms of style and content.

Topics:

Texts from exegeses by recognised authors in the field
Texts and explanation of some of the Prophet's (p.b.u.h.) sayings
Fiqh (Jurisprudence) texts preferably from all schools of thought (*madhhab*)
Sufism and Sufi thinkers

Issues in Language Curricula Design

In language courses, emphasis is generally laid on language proficiency but the content and topics, we have so far suggested, imply that our focus is eventually on the cultural component of the curriculum. Nevertheless, the issue of the language component within the curriculum must be addressed.

Students of Islamic studies, before joining higher education, have generally acquired reasonable knowledge of Arabic grammar, rhetoric and reading. These areas are the main focus of the Arabic language general education curriculum in most Muslim countries. Accordingly, they need more training in oral and written Arabic. They also need to be familiar with modern Arabic vocabulary and the idiomatic expressions of the language

as well as needing to enhance their academic writing skills. In other words, learners need to know the rules of the use of the language. These needs can only be fulfilled by the study of the real authentic texts of the language.

However, it seems wise to determine these rules and idioms after the choice of the culture-oriented texts. Experience has shown that our choice of language content is generally governed by texts content and not vice versa.

In recent years, a strong case has been made for an increase in cultural emphasis in language curricula. It has generally been observed that the role of culture in language curricula is underestimated. For this reason, specialists in the field of language education have tried to redress the balance. They advocate that language and culture should become integrated by shifting the weight of language teaching towards culture. (See Crawford-Lange and Lange 1984:141).

In the case of students of Islamic studies, it seems wise not to sacrifice either of the two objectives for the sake of the other. In this specific context, it is quite possible to direct the culture content of the curriculum to serve the purpose of language training and achieve language proficiency, and at the same time help students to acquire the basic concepts of Islamic culture necessary for their future studies.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have dealt so far with the components of a culture-oriented Arabic curriculum which we have defined also as a general language curriculum. We have underlined, at the same time, the legitimate place of Islamic culture in an Arabic language curriculum. It is an attempt to present culture learning as an integral part of language learning process. The ultimate goal is to help students learn and understand better the different aspects of Islamic culture and to acquire techniques that will eventually enable them to fulfil their specific language needs in Islamic studies.

It is true that the inventory of cultural topics suggested in this curriculum is vast. There is no doubt that the presentation of this vast array of topics will engender some serious challenges to the curriculum designer and the language teacher. The most formidable of these challenges is how to keep to manageable proportions the data and the resources of the culture content and to identify affective techniques for culture teaching. These challenges represent two sides of the same coin. They show clearly that language teachers are, in most cases, not familiar with handling substantive content which one finds in social studies or natural sciences. And the fact that our teaching of Islamic culture is to be done in Arabic, which is imperfectly known by our learners, is just another dimension to a tremendous mission and a complex task.

However, any effort toward the diffusion of Islamic traditions and culture is noble and rewarding and must be constantly sustained. Above all, Islamic civilization has so much to contribute in the development of values and ethics, both of which are urgently required by mankind in this global

era.

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