

## **Which Cultural Aspects Are Malay Learners of Arabic Interested in Knowing?**

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### **Abstract**

An important goal for foreign language learning is to equip learners with the linguistic and cultural skills to function effectively in this multicultural world. However, research on culture in language learning has almost always investigated teacher and scholar views. This study investigated the levels of interest and types of Arab culture that Malay Arabic learners' are interested in learning, from the perspective of learners themselves. This study employed a survey questionnaire consisting of 56 cultural items and representing six subconstructs and an open-ended question. 361 respondents representing Secondary Two students from four National Religious Secondary Schools (SMKA) were cluster sampled. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings indicate a high level of interest amongst respondents to know the Arab culture ( $m=4.88$ ). The subconstruct Religion and Education received the highest rating ( $m=5.27$ ). The respondents also suggested other cultural aspects that they are interested in learning, including the way Arabs think. Findings from this study are empirical evidence for curriculum designers and textbook writers on the aspects of Arab culture that deserve to be integrated into the Arabic learning experience.

***Keywords: Arabic; Arab culture; Arabic as a Foreign Language; Language learning; Multi-cultural Education***

## Abstrak

Antara matlamat utama pembelajaran bahasa asing ialah memberi kemahiran bahasa dan budaya kepada pelajar agar mereka berfungsi secara berkesan dalam dunia pelbagai budaya ini. Walaubagaimanapun, kajian tentang budaya dalam pembelajaran bahasa selalunya diselidik dari perspektif guru dan sarjana. Kajian ini menyelidik perspektif pelajar bahasa Arab berbangsa Melayu tentang tahap minat mereka dan jenis budaya Arab yang mereka minat untuk pelajari. Kajian ini menggunakan soal-selidik tinjauan yang mengandungi 56 item mewakili 6 subkonstruk, dan satu soalan terbuka. 361 responden mewakili pelajar Tingkatan Dua dipilih dari empat Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama dipilih secara *sampling* kelompok. Data kuantitatif dianalisa menggunakan statistik deskriptif. Data kualitatif pula dianalisa secara tema. Dapatan menunjukkan minat yang tinggi dalam kalangan responden untuk mengetahui budaya Arab ( $m=4.88$ ). Subkonstruk Agama dan Pendidikan mencatatkan min tertinggi ( $m=5.27$ ). Responden juga mencadangkan beberapa aspek budaya yang mereka ingin pelajari, termasuk cara bangsa Arab berfikir. Dapatan kajian ini adalah eviden empirikal untuk pembangun kurikulum dan penulis buku teks tentang aspek budaya Arab yang perlu diterap dalam pengalaman pembelajaran bahasa Arab.

***Kata kunci: Bahasa Arab; Budaya Arab; Bahasa Arab sebagai Bahasa Asing; pembelajaran bahasa; Pendidikan Pelbagai Budaya***

## INTRODUCTION

### THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING CULTURE

Given that language is the most representative element of a culture, language learning is incomplete if learners do not know some cultural aspects of the native speakers of the language (Brooks 1968, Thanasoulas 200, Genc and Bada 2005, Tang 2006, Zhang and Yan 2006, Leveridge 2008). In fact, one of the prime goals of foreign language learning is to prepare learners for interacting effectively with cultural competence in this multicultural world (ACTFL 1996 & 2015). A learner may not be able to competently function in the foreign language if he is not adequately equipped with the sociolinguistic knowledge of the language, which is essentially a cultural element. Understanding a culture means understanding how culture influences and shapes human behaviors and interactions (Furstenberg 2010). In turn, such understanding leads to a more complex learning outcome, which enriches a learner's perspective (Byram 2010). It also heightens a learner's cosmopolitan outlook, international posture and global competence, which would enable him or her to function more effectively in global contexts where foreign languages are means of communication.

Thus, beyond acquiring skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening, foreign language learning needs to be designed to enable learners to acquire cultural knowledge and intelligence of the target language. In addition, the learning of culture also poses pedagogical value in foreign language education. Previous studies imply that the learning of cultural aspects of the target language is

important in motivating, engaging and sustaining the interest of learners in learning the language (Gardner and Lambert 1972; Hadley 1993, Rammuny 1996, Kitao 2000).

## **ARABIC LEARNING AND DESIRE TO LEARN CULTURE**

Studies on Malaysian learners of foreign languages indicate that their learning of a particular foreign language is motivated by the desire to know the culture of the target language (Larisa and Fumitaka 2005, Pogadeav 2007, Ainol Madziah and Isarji 2009). In the context of Arabic learners in Malaysia, Kaseh, Nil Farakh and Zeti Akhtar 2010) found that aside from religious orientation, learners of Arabic are motivated by their interest in culture.

### **Types of culture**

While culture motivates language learning and cultural competence is a desirable outcome for language learning, the type or types of culture that should be taught in the foreign language classroom poses another issue. Brooks (1983) identified five meanings of culture: growth, refinement, fine arts, patterns of living and a total way of life. He suggested that patterns of living are the most important in the early phases of language instruction. Patterns of living include formal culture (Big C) and deep culture (small c). The formal culture refers to humanistic manifestations and contributions of a foreign culture such as art, music, literature, architecture, technology and politics. Some examples of the formal culture are monuments, buildings, masterpieces, inventions, governments, leaderships, etc. The deep culture or the small c encompasses behavioral patterns or lifestyles of the natives of the foreign culture: food, how they eat, how they make a living, attitudes and expressions. Some examples of the small c are greetings, staple and festive foods, traditional attires, hospitality, idioms, etc. Both the Big C and small c are necessary to balance between an appreciation of the contributions the culture makes to humanity, and an understanding of the perspectives and practices of individuals living in the culture. This balance would lead to a more effective global competence in learners.

The National Standards for Foreign Language (ACTFL 1996) categorized culture into 3P, which are perspectives, products and practices. Cultural perspectives refer to the values, beliefs, attitudes and assumptions shared in the target culture. Product refers to both tangible cultural products such as paintings, works of literature, art, music, and tools used in the target culture, and intangible products such as oral tales, rituals and systems of education. Finally, cultural practices refer to the patterns of behaviour and procedural aspects.

Morain (1997) argues that cultural products and cultural practices are one in that they manifest the underlying values, beliefs and worldviews of the target society. Morain reduced culture into Two Ms: cultural mind as a set of controlling mechanisms, and cultural manifestation as the products and practices of the cultural mind. Tang (2006) supports the need to go beyond knowing cultural manifestations, to understanding the perspectives and cultural mind that underlie these cultural manifestations.

Beyond understanding the cultural mind behind each product and practice lies a more complex need. In preparing learners for world-readiness, the need for making connections between cultural practices or products and the perspectives underlying them is only one side of the coin. The other side of the coin necessitates that learners make cultural comparisons between their own culture and that of the target language, such that would mount to heightened cultural awareness and increased intercultural competence (Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century 1996, The National Standard Collaborative Board 2015).

### ***Which aspects of culture?***

To date, studies on the types of culture to be introduced into the classroom predominantly come from the opinions of scholars, and not from learners. Learners are as involved as teachers and curriculum developers are in education. In fact, learners are the main stakeholder of education. Acknowledging opinions of students to partly inform curricula development may contribute to heightening a learner's sense of belonging and therefore empower him to engage in more self-directed and autonomous learning. Soliciting opinions from learners' themselves on the aspects of culture that they would be interested in knowing will provide some insights into the degree of interest learners have in learning culture and into the readiness of these learners to accept such exposure. Given the wide array of cultural aspects and limited temporal allowance for foreign language learning, insights on what students favour most to learn may facilitate selection of which cultural aspect to introduce in the language classroom. Thus, this study seeks to solicit Arabic learners' opinion on their interest in learning culture and the aspects of Arabic culture that they are most interested in learning.

### **LIMITATION**

While the researchers acknowledge the need for making connections between cultural products, practices and perspectives, this study is concerned only with learners' interest in cultural products and practices.

### **RESEARCH PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study are twofold: to measure the degree of interest in learning Arab culture amongst learners of Arabic in Malaysian secondary school setting; and to identify the types (products and practices) of cultures that these learners are interested in. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- i. What is the degree of interest of learners in learning Arab culture?
- ii. What are the types of cultures are learners most interested in?

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study is a survey research on learners' interest in learning Arab culture.

## Participants

Population for the study were learners of Arabic who have started learning the language and were not in the advanced stage of their study. This was to rule out the possibility that their responses could be influenced by demotivating factors in the teaching and learning process. They should also represent the various socio-economic status. The Ministry of Education of Malaysia further imposed that the respondents could only be selected from those who were not involved in any standardized national examinations in the year the study was conducted. After considering the characteristics of the learners and the restrictions of the education departments in conducting research studies, Secondary Two learners of Arabic in Malaysian national religious schools were identified as the population for the current study. These students were 14 years of age, a transition stage between childhood and adulthood, and therefore possessed the maturity and ability to think formally and to evaluate issues (Ulwan 1998, Piaget 1983). Given the non-discriminative admission policy of the Ministry of Education, it was safe to assume that these learners were representative of other learners of Arabic at Secondary Two level and of the various socio-economic levels. Based on the statistics provided by Malaysian Ministry of Education, the total population of these learners were 6161. Cluster sampling was employed to select the sample. 4 schools were selected to represent 4 geographical zones in Malaysia: Northern, Southern, Eastern and Middle. 361 participants were sampled, and this number was sufficient to represent a population of 6000 (Krejcie dan Morgan 1970).

## Instrument

This research employed a survey instrument comprising 3 parts: A, B and C. Part A solicited demographic items, the learners' grades in their mid-year Arabic test (Grades A, B, C, D, E), their level of interest in learning Arabic (rating scale, 1=not at all interested, 6=very interested) and their perception on the importance of knowing Arab culture (rating scale 1-6, 1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree). Part B comprised 56 items representing 6 subconstructs of culture (Table 1). Participants were asked to respond to a rating scale ranging from 1 to 6, with 1 indicating the least interest and 6 most interest.

Table 1 Distribution of Cultural Subconstructs and Items

Bil	Subconstruct	Item
1	History and Country	12
2	Culture and Lifestyle	13
3	Language and Communication	8
4	Clothes and Food	6
5	Religion and Education	8
6	Entertainment and Sports	9
	Total	56

Part C was an open ended section in which students were asked to write their suggestions on other aspects of Arab culture that were not covered by the items in Part B.

### **Instrument development and review**

Items pertaining to culture were developed based on literature and a pre-pilot field work in which 35 secondary schools students learning Arabic wrote 3 aspects of Arabic culture that they would be most interested in learning. The instrument was then reviewed by 3 reviewers who were academicians and teachers of Arabic language to ensure content validity. Several minor corrections and modifications were made in response to the reviewers' evaluation.

### **Pilot study**

The instrument was piloted on 40 students from a Malaysian national religious school representing the population. The Cronbach alpha for the pilot study indicated a high internal reliability ( $\alpha=0.90$ ).

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics. For Items 5-65 of Part B, a 6 category interest scale was employed. The rating mean scores were divided into 3 levels (Table 2):

TABLE 2 Classification of Levels of Interest

<b>No.</b>	<b>Mean range</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
1	1.00 – 2.66	low interest
2	2.67- 4.33	moderate interest
3	4.34- 6.00	high interest

For item 66 which was an open ended suggestion, 123 respondents (34.1%) suggested the cultural items that they would be interested in. The suggestions were analyzed into subthemes, and were calculated for frequency and percentage.

## **FINDINGS**

Research Question 1: What is the degree of interest do learners show in learning Arab culture?

Table 3 shows that the overall mean for the cultural survey is  $M= 4.88$ , indicating a high interest in learning Arab culture. A break-down of the subconstructs indicate a mean ranging from 4.37 to 5.27, implying that the students are highly interested in knowing all the aspects of culture surveyed. The highest interest was recorded for Religion and Education ( $M=5.27$ ), followed by Clothes and Food, Culture and Lifestyle, History and Country, and Language and Communication. While entertainment and sports subconstruct shows the lowest mean score ( $M=4.37$ ), it is nevertheless in the high category of interest.

**Table 3 Interest in Learning Arabic Culture (n=361)**

Sub construct	Frequency & Percentage			Mean	SD	Level
	1.00 - 2.66 (Low)	2.67- 4.33 (Moderate)	4.34-6.00 (High)			
Religion and Education	0 (0.0%)	34 (9.4%)	327 (90.6%)	5.27	0.64	High
Clothes and Food	2 (0.6%)	65 (18%)	294 (81.4%)	5.11	0.79	High
Culture and Lifestyle	0 (0.0%)	51 (14.1%)	310 (85.9%)	5.07	0.68	High
History and Country	1 (0.3%)	78 (21.6%)	282 (78.1%)	4.85	0.67	High
Language and Communication	12 (3.3%)	110 (30.8%)	239 (66.2%)	4.60	0.91	High
Entertainment and Sports	16 (4.4%)	149 (41.3%)	196 (54.3%)	4.37	0.96	High
Overall				4.88	0.76	High

Research Question 2: What are the specific types and aspects of the Arab culture are learners most interested in?

With respect to the second research question, a vast majority of the learners surveyed (90.6%) showed high interest in learning about the religious and educational aspects of the Arab culture, whereas 9.6% expressed moderate interest and not a single learner reported non-interest. Table 4 displays the learners' interest in religious and educational aspects of Arab culture. The mean for religious related items ranged between 5.63 to 5.37. They are items on knowing the ways Ramadan and Eid are celebrated, the ways Arab Muslims offer their acts of worship, and knowing the nature of interaction between males and females, knowing the specialty dishes for Ramadan and Eid, and knowing the biography of prominent Arab religious figures were rated above 5. These were followed by items related to education with the mean range of 4.95 to 4.88. The items were knowing the subjects learned by Arab students in secondary schools, knowing how Arab students go about learning, and seeing the images of classroom and schools in the Arab world. While interest in the religion and education items are high, it can be observed that there are distinct two sublevels, perhaps signalling the need to treat religion and education as two separate subconstructs.

Table 4 Interest in Religion and Education (n=361)

Item	Mean	SD
To see the way the Arabs celebrate Ramadhan and Eid.	5.63	0.68
To know the way Muslim Arabs perform their worship.	5.59	0.74
To know the way male and female interact in Arab culture.	5.44	0.85
To see the specialty dishes for breaking of fast and Eid.	5.39	0.87
To know prominent Arab religious scholars.	5.37	0.95
To know the subjects studied by Arab students in schools.	4.95	1.03
To know the way secondary Arab students study.	4.94	1.09
To see pictures of classroom and school environments.	4.88	1.12

### History and Country

With respect to items on history and country, Table 5 displays that 78.1% of the students surveyed reported high interest in the history and facts about Arab countries. 21.6% of the students expressed moderate interest, and only 1 respondent expressed low interest in these cultural items.

Items related to 'visiting' historical sites and tourist attractions received the highest rating. These were followed by items related to seeing the flora and fauna and viewing pictures of the sceneries of Arab countries. These were followed by items representing the hard facts of the countries, namely currency, climate and geography of the country, settlements, transportations, leaders and flags. Obviously, the respondents showed a high curiosity in facts about the Arabic speaking countries.

Table 5 Interest in History and Country (n=361)

Item	Mean	SD
Visiting historical heritage sites of prophets and ancient communities.	5.80	0.47
Visiting tourist attractions in the Arab world.	5.56	0.72
Seeing the flora and fauna of Arab countries.	5.09	1.01
Seeing pictures of natural environment of Arab countries.	5.08	1.05
Seeing currency of Arab countries.	4.83	1.12
Knowing the climate and geography of Arab countries.	4.82	1.04
Seeing the settlement of both Bedouin and modern Arabs.	4.81	1.09
Knowing the countries using Arabic language.	4.68	1.02
Knowing the history of the formation of Arab countries.	4.64	1.16
Knowing the development of transportation in the Arab countries.	4.43	1.20
Knowing Arab leaders.	4.32	1.21
Knowing flags of the Arab world.	4.19	1.25

Source: Survey 2011



## Life Style

Items pertaining to lifestyle indicate that all learners indicated interest in knowing the lifestyle of Arabs (Table 6). In fact, 85.9% of the students expressed high interest, whereas 14.1% expressed moderate interest. All the items scored means of above 5, with knowing the greatness of Arabs in wars at the top of the list. This item is followed by items on appreciation of the Arab architecture, the hospitality of Arabs in receiving guests, seeing the artistic and handicraft products, watching festive celebrations, watching wedding ceremonies and knowing the beliefs and taboos in the Arab societies.

Table 6 Interest in Lifestyle (n=361)

Item	Mean	SD
Knowing the greatness of Arabs in wars.	5.60	0.69
Viewing the Arabic architecture.	5.25	1.01
Experiencing the Arab hospitality in receiving guests	5.20	0.91
Seeing artistic and handicraft products of the Arabs.	5.19	1.01
Watching cultural festival of the Arabs.	5.15	0.96
Knowing the beliefs and taboos practiced by the Arab societies.	5.11	1.05
Watching weddings in Arab societies.	5.04	1.07
Knowing the distinct manners of the Arabs.	4.99	1.04
Knowing the activities that the Arabs do during their free time.	4.96	1.11
Watching how the Arabs ride camels, horses, donkeys.	4.94	1.15
Seeing how the Arabs dress.	4.84	1.07
Knowing life in Arab families.	4.84	1.09

Source: Survey 2011

## Language and Communication

Items pertaining to language and communication showed a relatively decreasing trend in interest. 66.2% of the participants surveyed reported high interest, 30% moderate interest and some 3.3% of the students showed low interest (Table 7). Only 1 item scored a mean corresponding to the highest category in the rating scale which is seeing the way Arabs communicate amongst themselves. Other items which are listening to Arabs conversing in standard Arabic, knowing the Arab ways of addressing and greeting others, listening to Arabs speaking in local dialects and watching the body gestures of Arabs when speaking received means approaching 5.0.

Table 7 Interest in Language and Communication

Item	Mean	SD
Seeing the way Arabs communicate amongst themselves.	5.05	1.07

Listening to Arabs speaking in standard Arabic.	4.98	1.23
Knowing the Arab ways of addressing and greeting others.	4.98	1.08
Listening to Arabs speaking in local dialects.	4.88	1.26
Watching body gestures of Arabs when speaking.	4.75	1.11
Getting to know Arabs over the internet.	4.36	1.36
Following blogs of Arab teenagers.	3.97	1.32
Reading magazines written by Arabs.	3.84	1.35

Source: Survey 2011

### Food and Clothings

With respect to food and clothings, 2 respondents (0.6%) indicated low interest, 65 respondents (18%) reported moderate interest and 294 respondents (81.4%) expressed a high interest (Table 8). Items that received the highest rating ( $M > 5.0$ ) were seeing and tasting local Arab fruits, seeing and tasting traditional Arab food, seeing the ways Arabs prepare their dishes, seeing and touching traditional Arab attires. 2 other items approached a mean of 5.0 and they are seeing the way modern Arabs dress and seeing the ways Arabs eat.

Table 8 Interest in Food and Clothings (n=361)

Item	Mean	SD
Seeing and tasting local Arab fruits.	5.41	0.90
Seeing and tasting traditional Arab food.	5.27	0.97
Seeing the ways Arab prepare their dishes.	5.09	1.08
Seeing and touching traditional Arab attires.	5.05	1.11
Seeing the way modern Arabs dress.	4.98	1.08
Seeing the ways Arabs eat.	4.85	1.13

Source: Survey 2011

### Entertainment and Sports

Table 9 indicates that more than half of the respondents (54.3%) showed high interest in knowing about the entertainment and sports of Arab culture, 41.3% expressed moderate interest and 4.4% expressed low interest. Items in the entertainment and sports subconstruct that received the highest mean are seeing how Arab teenagers entertain themselves ( $m=4.93$ ) and Watching and experiencing traditional arab games ( $m=4.92$ ). These are followed by following the development of popular sports in the Arab countries, seeing and listening to traditional Arabic musical instruments, knowing renowned football teams in the Arab countries. Moderate interest was reported for watching popular Arab television programs ( $M=3.99$ ) and learning to sing national anthems of the Arab countries ( $M=3.77$ ).

Table 9 Interest in Entertainment and Sports (n=361)

Item	Mean	SD
Seeing how Arab teenagers entertain themselves.	4.93	1.17
Watching and experiencing traditional arab games.	4.92	1.20
Following the development of popular sports in the Arab countries.	4.50	1.35
Seeing and listening to traditional Arabic musical instruments.	4.39	1.36
Knowing renowned football teams in Arab countries.	4.32	1.56
Watching traditional arab dances.	4.27	1.35
Knowing popular artists and songs among Arab teenagers.	4.24	1.40
Watching popular arab television programs.	3.99	1.34
Learning to sing national anthems of the Arab countries.	3.77	1.42

Source: Survey 2011

### Top 21 Cultural Items

Table 10 summarizes the 21 items that had mean scores above 5.0. The top 5 in the list are visiting historical heritage or the prophets and ancient societies (M=5.80), seeing the Arabs celebrate Ramadan and Eid (M=5.63), knowing the greatness of Arabs in wars (M=5.60) and seeing the muslim Arabs performing their acts of worship (M=5.59).

Table 10 Top Arab Cultural Items (n=361)

Item	Mean	SD
Visiting historical heritage sites of the prophets and ancient communities.	5.80	0.47
Seeing the ways Arab celebrate Ramadan and Eid.	5.63	0.68
Knowing the greatness of Arabs in wars.	5.60	0.69
knowing the way Muslim Arabs perform their worship	5.59	0.74
Visiting tourist attractions in the Arab world	5.56	0.72
knowing the way male and female interact in Arab culture.	5.44	0.85
Seeing and tasting local Arab fruits.	5.41	0.90
Seeing specialty Arab dishes for Ramadhan and eid.	5.39	0.87
Knowing prominent Arab religious scholars.	5.37	0.95
Seeing and tasting traditional Arab food	5.27	0.97
Viewing the Arabic architecture	5.25	1.01
Experiencing the Arab hospitality in receiving guests	5.20	0.91
Seeing art and handicraft products of the Arabs.	5.19	1.01
Watching cultural festivals of arab societies.	5.15	0.96
Knowing the beliefs and taboos in Arab societies.	5.11	1.05
See the ways Arabs prepare their dishes.	5.09	1.08
Seeing the flora and fauna of Arab countries.	5.09	1.01
Seeing pictures of natural environment in Arab countries.	5.08	1.05
Seeing how Arabs communicate amongst themselves.	5.05	1.07
Seeing and touching traditional Arab dresses.	5.05	1.11
Seeing Arab wedding ceremonies.	5.04	1.07

### Bottom 4 items

Table 11 shows that only 4 items received mean scores of less than 4.0. They are learning to sing the national anthems of Arab countries (M=3.77), followed by reading magazines and comics written by Arab writers (M=3.84), following blogs by Arab teenagers (M=3.97) and watching television programs in Arab countries (M=3.99).

Table 11 Cultural Items With the Lowest Rating (n=361)

Item	Mean	SD
Learn to sing national anthems of the Arab countries	3.77	1.42
Reading magazines and comics written by Arab writers.	3.84	1.35
Following blogs by arab teenagers	3.97	1.32
Watching popular arab television programs	3.99	1.34

Source: Survey 2011

### Further suggestions from respondents

The frequency and percentage of occurrence of cultural themes reveal that the religious and educational subconstruct received the most suggestions (n=36, 29.27%), followed by social and current issues (n=31, 25.20%), economy (n=19, 15.45%), history and country (n=17, 13.82%) and life style (n=17, 13.82%). In terms of detailed themes, the subconstruct of social issues (n=15, 12.20%) had the most suggestions, followed by the themes on manners in doing transactions (n=9, 7.32%), the ways Arabs recite the Quran (n=7, 5.69%), and knowing about the high typology of knowledge in Arab tradition (n=6, 4.88%).

Table 12 Learner suggestions for other cultural items (n=123)

Subconstru ct	Item	n	Percen tage
History and country	Knowing in depth about Arab civilization.	1	0.81
	Administrative system of the country	2	1.63
	Arab-Israel relation	2	1.63
	Solidarity and security in the country	4	3.25
	Total	9	7.32
Economy	Arab culture in transaction	9	7.32
	Environment in the shopping centers.	4	3.25
	Economic development activities	3	2.44
	Socio-economic status of the societies	2	1.63
	Value of Arab currencies, relative to Malaysia currency	1	0.81
	Total	19	15.45
Social and Current	Current development of Arab states.	2	1.63
	Contemporary technology and inventions	3	2.44
	Internet youth among teenagers	2	1.63
	Looks and skin complexion of Arabs	2	1.63

	Naming of babies amongst Arabs	1	0.81
	Crime rate	1	0.81
	Types of punishments for criminals/offenders.	5	4.07
	Social problems among Arab teenagers.	15	12.20
	<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>25.20</b>
Life style	Work culture	3	2.44
	How Arabs express anger	2	1.63
	How Arabs maintain relationship in the family	2	1.63
	Filial and elderly piety	5	4.07
	Arab parenting	5	4.07
	<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>13.82</b>
Thinking	How Arabs think	2	1.63
	Arab perspectives of women	2	1.63
	Likes and dislikes	2	1.63
	<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4.88</b>
Food and Clothings	Knowing the different types of snacks, sweet delicacies and chocolates	3	2.44
	Sports clothings	2	1.63
	<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4.07</b>
Religion and education	Fraternity among Arabs	3	2.44
	Interaction among Arab muslims and non Muslims	2	1.63
	Religious differences and conflicts	1	0.81
	How arabs practice Islam	1	0.81
	Examples of bidah in Arab societies	1	0.81
	Different religious doctrines and schools of thoughts practiced by arabs	1	0.81
	How arabs recite alQuran	7	5.69
	How arabs memorize alquran	2	1.63
	Listening to praises of the prophets, qasidahs and religious songs	3	2.44
	Listening to calls for prayer by Arabs	2	1.63
	Tips and practices of excellent Arab students	1	0.81
	How Arabs learn Arabic	2	2.44
	Knowing the higher education institutions in Arab countries	1	0.81
	Students ethics towards teachers	3	2.44
	Knowing the knowledge culture and the typology of knowledge culture in Arab societies	6	4.88
	<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>29.27</b>

## DISCUSSION

The current study discovered the following:

- i. Students show a high interest in learning Arabic culture;
- ii. Religious and educational aspects of culture, followed by food and clothings are the cultural themes that learners are most interested in. Life style, language and communication, history and country, and entertainment and sports are also within the high range;
- iii. The top 5 cultural items are Visiting historical heritage sites of prophets and ancient communities Seeing the ways Arab celebrate Ramadan and Eid. Knowing the greatness of Arabs in wars, to know the way Muslim Arabs perform their worship, to know the way males and females interact in Arab culture. Whereas the items at the bottom of the list are singing national anthems of Arab states, reading magazines and comics written by Arab writers, following blogs by arab teenagers and watching TV programmes aired in Arab countries;
- iv. Three new themes appeared in the respondents' suggestions: economy, current and social issues and the Arab ways of thinking. The most popular new items proposed by students were related to religion and education, social issues, transactions and Quranic recitation.

### Learners' interest in various aspects of culture

This study concurs with previous findings that learners are indeed very interested in learning about the countries and societies of native speakers (Rammuny 1996, Larissa & Fumatika 2005, Pogadaev 2007, AinolMadziah and Isarji 2009, Kaseh, Nil Farakh and ZetiAkhtar 2010). While Azman (2010) suggested the inclusion of socio-cultural aspects in Arabic learning, findings from the current study specifically indicates that learners are interested in almost all aspects of the Arab culture that were investigated in the study, whether or not they relate to language use.

Another intriguing discovery in this study is the fact that the students' interest in Arabic culture are not limited to the small c and day to day cultural practices. This is especially obvious in the students' request for the inclusion of social and economic issues as well as understanding the Arab mind. Apparently, more aspects of the Big C need to be considered in developing a cultural-enhanced language curriculum.

### The Perspective Aspect of Culture

The fact that the students want to learn the ways Arab think shows their interest in learning the Arab culture beyond 'Products and Practices' to 'Perspectives'. This finding is indeed in line with the *raison d'être* of teaching cultures. The willingness to appreciate a culturally different perspective is a welcoming sign that students of this age are ready for cultural intelligence and cross-cultural training. Thus language teaching should capitalize on this readiness to build students' international posture and world readiness.

## **Religious and educational aspects of culture**

Findings indicate that for the participants surveyed in this study, religious and educational aspects of the Arab culture top the list. This can be attributed to at least two reasons. First, Arabic is strongly associated as the language of Islam, and is often categorized as a religious language. Given that the respondents were all Muslim Malay learners and were being educated in religious school systems, it is no surprise that the religious aspect of items receive the highest rating in terms of interest. Previous research has shown that religious understanding and servitude factor is the primary motive driving Muslim learners to learn Arabic. (Kaseh and Zainuddin 2009) (Ainol Madziah Zubairi and Isarji Hj Sarudin 2009), (Kaseh, Nil Farakh, and Zeti Akhtar 2010) dan (Kamarul Shukri et al. 2010). The second reason for such interest can be attributed to the fact that these respondents were curious about a foreign culture that shares the same religion that they do. They were interested in knowing whether the Arab Muslims practice Islam the way they do, and what are the similarities and differences in these practices. Items that belong to a the historical sub-construct such as visiting the traces of prophets and the glory of Arabs in wars also had very high ratings as these too are synonymous with the religion of Islam.

### **Are my Arab peer like me?**

Being teenagers, the respondents in this study were also curious about what their Arab counterparts do: what do they learn in school? How do they interact with each other? Teenagers are naturally open to and often react to peer influence. This is understandable because developing peer relationships in an important part of a teen's life. Foreign language education may capitalize on this fact to create a positive intercultural influence on learners. In our effort to build the teen learners' international culture, they need to gain access to cultural experience. A teenager would rather want to know about what other teenagers do as opposed to what younger children do or what elderly people do. If inter cultural relationships are established, perhaps it is more meaningful for them to relate culturally to someone of their age than someone who is way below or way above their age. Thus it is beneficial that foreign language education take advantage of this fact, that is to enrich learners' cultural experience by exposing them to their peers' cultural products, practices and perspectives.

### **Entertainment and Sports**

Compared to other cultural aspects, entertainment and sports ranked lower. One possible explanation could be that the learners come from a system which sees entertainment and sports as something secondary to the curriculum and had always been given less importance compared to pure academic content. Secondly, the religious orientation of these learners could also influence them to have lower interest in entertainment matters.

## **Cultural items with lower scores**

It is also interesting to note that items such as learning to sing national anthems of Arab countries, reading comics and magazines written by and for Arabs, following the blogs of Arab teenagers, and watching television programs of the Arab countries were rated lower than other items. This can be attributed to several possible reasons. Firstly, the students have not been exposed to these mediums in Arabic. Their learning has perhaps been limited to classroom textbooks and examination-related exercises. While they enjoy vast access to TV programs, movies and social media like blogs and Facebooks, they have not quite tasted the richness of similar mediums in enhancing their cultural and language competence in Arabic and the Arab culture. A second possible reason would be the fact that the activities in the items require much linguistic processing on the part of the learner. Therefore, they may perceive these activities as “cognitively and linguistically demanding”. Perhaps, they have not attained the linguistic skills to effectively engage in such activities. Thirdly, understanding culture or singing songs or reading Arabic comics and blogs were not propagated as their motives or objectives for learning Arabic. Thus these activities may appear less relevant to them.

## **L2 Motivational Self-System**

It is interesting to link interest in engaging in cultural activities to Dornyei's L2 Motivational Self-System (2005). This system theorizes that asserts learners who visualize what they are able to do in the foreign language will work towards closing the gap between their current ability and the ideal L2 self that they want to become. The closer the ideal L2 self is to what the native speakers of the language can do, the higher the learners will want to interact with authentic sources in the language. The fact that the learners' interest in dealing with authentic social activities is relatively lower than other cultural items may imply that the learners do not foresee themselves doing these things. In other words, they may not have a clear understanding and picture of who is the ideal L2 self they want to become. This is quite in line with findings by Kaseh and Zainuddin (2000) that Malay college learners of Arabic do not report a sufficient amount of Ideal L2 self in a manner that would really guide their language acquisition. Busse and Williams (2010) has shown that the intensity of motivation and passion in learning the German language is attributed to their ability to visualize themselves as competent language learners.

However, the fact that learners rating on these items are still within the higher end of agreement indicate the presence of interest to engage themselves with such authentic activities. What is probably lacking is the opportunity to be theoretically and practically exposed to the nature and value of these activities and. In fact, in a subsequent interview, one of the respondents reported that he never thought of surfing Arabic blogs because he never knew that such social media existed in Arabic. Thus one of the most important means to get learners to visualize their L2 Self is to provide continuous exposure in cultural aspects of the language (Zainur Rijal Abdul Razak and Rosni Samah 2006) Kaseh and Zainuddin 2009). Cultural exposure needs to be coupled with some guidance in interacting



with and engaging in these activities, such that learners know how best to benefit from them for language acquisition and cultural competence.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Malay learners of Arabic are not merely interested in learning the Arabic language, but they are also interested in learning the cultural aspects of the language. While religious related cultural aspects top the list, they have shown that they are equally interested in learning other cultural aspects which span across politics, history, clothings, food, entertainment and sports. Thus, aspects from Arab culture needs to be continuously included in the learning experience of learners. Continuous exposure to the culture will help learners visualize a positive Ideal L2 Self, which in turn, will guide their language learning and definitely, increase their global competence. Future research needs to further refine the items in the survey. Research investigation into the processing of these cultural products and practices to perspectives need to conducted in order to gain insights into how best to spur the world-readiness of learners of Arabic to function in the Arab world.

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