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INTEGRATING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE INTO TEACHING ARABIC AS A MULTIDIALECTAL LANGUAGE THROUGH TELECOLLABORATION

Abstract:

Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) teachers and learners face many challenges due to the diglossic nature of the Arabic language (Sneed, 2012). In Arabic, there is a "high" variety, also called Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and "low" vernacular varieties, each with its unique features and characteristics. However, in many traditional language classrooms, learners are often exposed to only MSA. Thus, there has been a call for a multidialectal or integrated approach to address learners' goals to prepare them with the skills needed to communicate in real-life situations (Trentman & Shiri, 2020; Younes, 2014). Language is complexly intertwined with culture; thus, developing learners' intercultural communicative competence (henceforth, ICC) is essential to allow AFL learners to understand and use Arabic dialects and MSA to communicate appropriately and effectively (Bassiouney, 2009). ICC allows interlocutors to understand communication ethics, develop critical thinking, improve cultural awareness, and communicate successfully with representatives of the target language cultures (Byram, 1997). Researchers have advocated for new approaches to teaching the Arabic language and culture (Wilmsen, 2006). One of the untraditional approaches is telecollaboration projects. Integrating telecollaboration with an appropriate pedagogical foundation can enhance the quality of AFL teaching and learning experiences and help students become dialectally and interculturally competent (O'Dowd, 2016). This article reviews literature on how current work on telecollaboration and ICC development can support the multidialectal and integrated approach to Arabic teaching. In this paper, the author explores ways to move away from the traditional representation of culture and closer to innovative methods in which technology can support AFL teachers and learners as they seek to learn dialects and understand the target culture through language. This paper proposes telecollaboration as a pedagogy that has been studied in teaching languages other than Arabic. Based on existing literature, this paper proceeds by reporting the challenges and affordances of telecollaboration and ways of overcoming the challenges.

Introduction

The Arab world stretches from the Arabian Peninsula to the Northwest African continent. Arabs living in this region speak different dialects. In addition, Arabic is a diglossic language, with a high variety (MSA or Classical Arabic) and low varieties (regional dialects). Despite its diglossic nature, Arabic has been increasingly popular as a language of study in the United States, especially since the 9/11 attacks (Al-Qattan & Abuemira, 2020). Between 1998 and 2013, Arabic enrollments increased by over 600% (Goldberg et al., 2015). In the post-9/11 world, Arabic became a critical language that is highly demanded and critical to U.S. national security (Abu-Melhim, 2014). It is considered an important language in the U.S. due to its critical role in global commerce, culture, and society (Al-Batal, 2007; Taha, 2007).

Learning a new language does not only mean learning the alphabet, the grammar rules, and vocabulary, but it also means learning the behavior of the society and cultural customs associated with the target language because language and culture are inseparable (Kramsch, 1993). Risager (2005, p. 190), states "human culture always includes language and human language cannot be thought without culture. Linguistic practice is always embedded in, and in interaction with, some cultural, meaningful context". One way to equip language learners with the necessary linguistic and cultural skills to communicate successfully with speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds is to foster their development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997).

In today's globalizing world, telecollaboration is one of the ways that online communication tools bring together language learners from different countries for intercultural exchange. Telecollaboration can be used to expose Arabic learners to Arabic dialects and the diverse cultures associated with each dialect. It is achieved through various communication tech tools such as emails, social media platforms, online chats, and video conferencing applications. It has proven to have significant effects on learners' linguistic and intercultural gain (O'Dowd, 2012). Although literature in the area reveals successful telecollaborative exchanges, they are not guaranteed; however, researchers often suggest ways of overcoming these challenges because their benefits predominate their complexities (e.g., Avgousti, 2018).

Arabic Diglossia

Arabic consists of two varieties: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and various regional dialects (Ferguson, 1959). They coexist to fulfill different societal functions. This part of the paper puts forward a comparison between MSA and dialects.

MSA is the "modern equivalent of Classical Arabic" (Trentman, 2011, p.26). Classical Arabic is the language of the Qura'an. MSA and CA have the same syntax, but MSA has been developed to expand the vocabulary of CA and reduce some of its morphosyntactic features to keep up with modern, evolving day-to-day living (Trentman, 2011). MSA is described as a high variety because it is considered prestigious due to its rich literary tradition (Van Moll, 2003). While dialect (also referred to as spoken vernacular or colloquial) is considered low for being used in everyday informal communications.

MSA and regional dialects are used in spoken and written forms (Trentman & Shiri, 2020). MSA is the standardized Arabic taught in schools and used in formal writing, formal speech, broadcast media, and educational and religious settings (Trentman & Shiri, 2020). In contrast, dialect is the common mother tongue and authentic language learned at home and used for everyday communication in formal and informal settings. Although dialects are not taught in educational settings, they are used for speech communication in educational settings. Dialect is also used in written literature (Haeri, 2003), some broadcast media, and informal written communications, such as social media, text messages, and personal letters.

Dialects vary from one region to the other in Arabic-speaking countries. Dialects spoken in geographically close countries are more mutually intelligible (e.g., Kuwait and Qatar) than those spoken in countries separated by vast distances (e.g., Morocco and Egypt). Arabs function within a continuum of linguistic competence that encompasses a range of performances calibrating their interactions according to the sociolinguistic factors (e.g., gender, age, class, occupation, situation, education) and contextual factors (e.g., topics, the formality of the exchange, and the situation) (Ryding, 2006). Arabs from different dialect backgrounds use low varieties interchangeably, sometimes switching towards a European language or English or even code-switching between a combination of the three languages (Trentman, 2011; Walters, 2003).

Given its complex nature, the Department of State classified Arabic as the only Semitic language in category III of hard languages that are difficult for native English speakers. Despite Arabic's complex nature, students have a great desire to learn spoken Arabic (Palmer, 2007). However, whether to teach MSA or dialects or both varieties remain an issue in teaching AFL. The question of how to approach the complex diglossic situation in Arabic pedagogically and whether to teach MSA or dialect(s) or both varieties remain an existential question that has occupied Arabic teachers, researchers, and curriculum developers for a long time (Al-Batal, 2017).

Teaching MSA Versus Teaching Dialects

In language classrooms, researchers privilege teaching primary discourse, the language used in everyday interactions with family and friends (Byrnes, 2002). However, in AFL instruction and curriculum development, teachers tend to favor teaching the secondary discourse of profession and academy over the primary discourse of authenticity and familiarity (Ryding, 2006). Many Arabic programs still offer courses mainly in MSA (Shiri, 2015; Younes, 2014), and dialect remains the practice of very few programs in the U.S. (Al-Batal, 2017). Ryding (2006) describes this as "reverse privileging" and postulates that it is the main issue facing teaching AFL in the U.S. Reverse privilege is why it is difficult to determine and assess AFL students' proficiency skill level (Ryding, 2006).

Favoring MSA

Relying only on MSA for teaching Arabic has been critiqued for its limited functionality. Research showed that study abroad AFL students who did not have prior knowledge of the host country's dialect could not integrate into the target culture (Shiri, 2013; Palmer, 2007). In Shiri (2013), a student attending an Arabic summer intensive program in Jordan recalled:

> We came here and started out speaking Fusha [MSA] to taxi drivers, restaurant owners, etc. We were laughed at, not understood, and stood out as foreigners. Then, when I began to pick up and use the dialect, reactions immediately changed. I was taken more seriously, I was complimented on my Arabic, I was asked if I was Jordanian, and I was able to hold lengthy conversations with people. The doors that can open for you if you know the dialect (or at least attempt to use it) are unlimited. (p. 578)

In another study abroad research, Palmer (2007) stated:

> Students who have only studied this "high variety," or formal Arabic, are kept outside the in-groups and often experience frustration and embarrassment when trying to communicate with Arabic speakers. (p. 112)

MSA is a very formal variety that is inadequate for informal discourse; this explains why participants were alienated and laughed at for using MSA. Such negative encounters can promote negative feelings such as a lack of motivation, self-confidence, and learning anxiety, which could altogether obstruct language learning (Al-Mohsen, 2016). Teaching only MSA "creates a fake model of oral proficiency by presenting the students with an artificial variety that is not used by the native speakers since no one uses (formal Arabic) for daily-life situations" (Al-Batal, 1995, p. 123). Teaching an artificial variety is a disservice to AFL learners who aim to learn the language used in everyday life (Salameh, 2018). Favoring only one variety of Arabic to teach "will seriously prejudice the ability of the non-native learner to communicate effectively in an Arabic-speaking community" (Wahba, 2006, p.139). Teaching only MSA creates a gap in AFL learners' communicative competence and prevent them from attaining

their full potential in language proficiency (Ryding, 2006). Hence, AFL teachers are encouraged to stop privileging MSA over other dialects because it is necessary to teach both variants together and understand Arabic and its regional and social dialects as extensions of one another rather than two separate entities (Al-Batal, 2017).

Integrated and multidialectal pedagogical approaches

A distinctive pedagogical approach, such as the integrated and multidialectal approaches, is needed to overcome only MSA instruction and still meet its requirements as a diglossic language (Al-Mohsen, 2016). Since native Arabic speakers encounter both MSA and dialects, it is similarly important for non-native speakers of Arabic to be exposed to both varieties (Al-Mohsen, 2016). Cornelius Van Dyck, an American missionary and translator of the Bible into Arabic, postulated in an essay he wrote in 1892, "Beginners often ask, "Shall I learn the classic or the vulgar Arabic first?" The proper reply to this question is, "learn both together." Get your phrases in the common dialect to be able to use them without appearing pedantic, but learn the correct, classical expression at the same time if there be a difference." (p.3). Therefore, an integrated approach that teaches both MSA and dialect or a multidialectal approach that teaches various dialects and MSA is needed to address this issue (Al-Batal, 2017; Al-Mohsen, 2016; Soliman, 2014; Trentman & Shiri, 2020; Younes, 2014.

The integrated approach refers to the instruction of an Arabic dialect alongside MSA. This approach enables students to engage in purposeful and relevant learning experiences where the instructed varieties are equally relevant and important to increase students' communicative competence, help them develop their Arabic speaking fluency, improve their comprehension, develop their metalinguistic awareness, and communicate efficiently with speakers of the target language in everyday contexts (Al-Batal, 2017; Salameh, 2018; Soliman, 2014; Trentman & Shiri, 2020).

Another option is integrating multiple dialects with MSA in AFL classrooms. It is often referred to as the multi-dialectal approach (Trentman & Shiri, 2020). It is important to note that this approach does not necessarily require AFL teachers to develop learners' proficiency in all dialects. Instead, it encourages exposing learners at all levels to various dialects and drawing their attention to metalinguistic features across dialects and to the social meanings of these linguistic features (Trentman & Shiri, 2020). Trentman and Shiri (2020) further elaborate on the multidialectal approach, describing it as an instructional method that:

> teaches students to embrace the sociolinguistic variation present in Arabic by separating
> goals in receptive and productive modes and using training in metalinguistic awareness

> to help students develop a toolkit and mindset to use when encountering new varieties, while also developing their general proficiency through thematic units and a focus on language functions (e.g., introductions, asking questions) (p.126).

Exposing AFL learners to multiple Arabic varieties should not be scary to teachers, as there is a high degree of mutual intelligibility between Arabic dialects (Trentman & Shiri, 2020). This means speakers of different Arabic dialects can understand each other to a great extent. There is a high extent of comprehension within cross-dialectal conversations between not only native speakers (Soliman, 2014) but also non-native speakers (Trentman & Shiri, 2020). Native speakers of Arabic mainly rely on their native dialect in cross-dialectal interaction with very few borrowings from MSA and draw from various dialectal resources (Soliman, 2014).

With explicit strategy and lexical training, AFL learners can comprehend cognates in unfamiliar dialects and improve their dialectal lexical comprehension (Soliman, 2014). An integrated approach or a multidialectal teaching model is necessary to help learners develop the skill of recognizing, identifying, and understanding speech variations between MSA and regional dialect(s). A multidialectal teaching model fosters learners' ability to differentiate between mixed dialects early on in their language learning journey (Trentman & Shiri, 2020). This trains students to have the necessary skills to cope with Arabic variability (Soliman, 2014).

Benefits of the Integrated and Multidialectal Approaches

The multidialectal and integrated teaching approach benefits students on many levels. Continuous exposure to Arabic dialect(s) through comprehensible input is essential for AFL learners. This exposure aids AFL learners in identifying and comprehending Arabic varieties, enabling effective communication with diverse Arabic speakers from across the world and fostering their confidence in navigating and adapting to sociolinguistic variations within the Arabic language (Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006; Trentman & Shiri, 2020). Raising students' sociolinguistic awareness of factors that govern the proper usage of Arabic can help AFL learners learn how to interpret the surrounding environment by distinguishing where, whom, and when they speak (Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006; Soliman, 2014; Trentman & Shiri, 2020). These approachs raise students' metalinguistic awareness, which allows them to grasp how MSA and Arabic dialect(s) are appropriately used and thus helps them to function in conversations by varying their speech along the continuum between MSA and regional dialect(s) (Trentman & Shiri, 2020; Younes, 2014). In applying a multi-dialectal approach, Trentman and Shiri (2020) urge educators and students to "use the varieties that reflect their exposure or desired identities while also developing their abilities to shift their language in situations where they may wish to accommodate to other speakers or contextual factors"

(p.127). AFL teachers can increase students' knowledge of their linguistic choices through metalinguistic awareness. Metalinguistic awareness empowers students to consciously explore the opportunities of using dialect(s) that accommodate interlocutors and their desired identities. Enhancing and supporting students' metacognitive toolkit raises students' awareness about MSA and dialect(s) and opens doors to understanding common multilingual situations where Arabic speakers converse in a mixture of dialect and colonial languages such as English or French. Metacognitive awareness prepares AFL students to draw from various multilingual and dialect(s) resources to negotiate meaning with interlocutors of the target language (Al Masaeed, 2020; Trentman & Shiri, 2020). Stepping away from the monodialectal policy of using only MSA and moving closer to an intergrated or multidialectal pedagogical approach can indeed empower learners with a valuable interactional resource that can enhance students' skills of "meaning-making, identity negotiation, and knowledge construction" during multidialectal and multilingual interactions (Al Masaeed, 2020, p.1).

Fostering Intercultural Communicative Competence in Arabic Language Education: Byram's Model in Practice
Integrating Byram's Model of ICC into Arabic language education is a powerful approach to promote effective intercultural communication skills among Arabic learners. There is little consensus on the definition of ICC among scholars. Out of the various scholarly definitions, Byram's will be discussed as it is a commonly accepted definition of intercultural competence for pedagogical purposes that highlights the multifaceted nature of ICC (Deardorff, 2006; Dervin, 2010). Byram (1997) defined ICC as the "knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing oneself. Linguistic competence plays a key role" (Byram, 1997, p.34). This definition shows that the development of ICC enables learners to compare differences and similarities between one's culture and other cultures.

Byram's model of ICC has been critiqued for providing inconsistent and oversimplified representations of cultural concepts and identities, as well as for suggesting that culture is unified and consistent rather than dynamic and diverse (Dervin, 2016). However, many modern scholars draw heavily on his model to highlight the importance of developing language learners' abilities to go beyond surface-level language proficiency by comprehending and interpreting culture and reflecting on how culture shapes the process of meaning-making and how cultures are portrayed in diverse forms of discourse (Kearney, 2015). This theme has gained increasing focus due to its multifaceted implications for language education and intercultural competence. It represents a holistic approach to language education that prepares

learners to communicate effectively and appreciate the diversity and complexity of the target culture (Kearney, 2015).

While Byram's model has its limitations and critiques, it can still serve as a valuable framework for teaching language learners to navigate the complexities of cultural interactions, fostering a deeper understanding of Arabic-speaking cultures and promoting effective communication in diverse contexts. His model represents a multidimensional view of ICC (Kearney & Ahn, 2013). His ICC model includes linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence of the target language, in addition to the five ICC elements (Kearney, 2015). What is notable in Byram's model is that the development of language proficiency and cultural competence are both fundamental for the development of ICC (Kearney & Ahn, 2013).

Byram's portrayal of the knowledge dimension within ICC, for instance, takes a broader perspective than how it is traditionally presented in language education. His model emphasizes a more comprehensive understanding (Kearney, 2015). In his model, knowledge encompasses "knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interactions" (Byram, 1997, p.51) rather than a collection of "trivia" facts (Kearney, 2015, p.34) such as food and holidays in the target culture.

Teaching Arabic through the lens of Byram's ICC model is the focus of this paper because it includes two areas closely related to the integrated and multidialectal approaches: communicative competence and intercultural competence. Byram highlights the importance of the relationship between intercultural competence and linguistic competence and asserts that the significant role of linguistic competence as an aspect of intercultural competence is shown during intercultural exchanges in a foreign language context. Communicative competence consists of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence. In contrast, intercultural competence consists of a series of five knowledgeabilities for developing ICC: (1) knowledge of self and others, (2) attitudes of openness and curiosity, (3) skills of interpreting and relating, (4) skills of discovery and interaction, and (5) critical cultural awareness (Byram et al., 2002, pp. 11-13).

Arabic is spoken in diverse geographic and social communities, which means that learners must engage with multiple cultural values, customs, beliefs, and traditions to communicate in a culturally sensitive and respectful way. By teaching Arabic through the lens of Byram's Model, AFL teachers can help learners develop the necessary attitudes, knowledge, skills, discourse,

and awareness to communicate with Arabic speakers. Byram's model can be seen as an antidote to ethnocentrism as it promotes intercultural understanding by recognizing cultural differences and emphasizing the importance of reflecting upon one's culture and other cultures. The model can thus increase learners' willingness to communicate after encouraging AFL learners to move away from stereotypes and prejudice and towards a more inclusive and respectful approach to communication. This is particularly important in light of the discrimination faced by Arabs and Muslims in the US and other parts of the world following the 9/11 attacks.

Teaching Arabic dialects within the framework of Byram's intercultural model is helpful as it helps learners understand the cultural nuances and practices associated with different dialects, thus appreciating the diversity of the Arabic-speaking world. In teaching Arabic, teachers can focus on Byram's interrelated components (knowledge, attitude, skills, and reflective practices) of ICC as a guideline.

For example, For example, to nurture positive *attitudes* toward dialects, educators can employ various strategies. Conducting dialect comparison activities encourages students to explore and appreciate cultural attitudes, values, and traditions across different Arabic-speaking regions, fostering a respectful attitude toward cultural diversity. Engaging students in discussions on relevant topics, such as politics and social issues, using the dialect(s) they are learning enhances both language and intercultural communication *skills*. Additionally, organizing cultural events inside or outside the class, like attending festivals or inviting guest speakers or learning traditional dances and songs or preparing a cultural dish, provides hands-on experiences that go beyond mere observation, enhancing students' *knowledge* and promoting interaction and meaningful immersive learning experiences. Furthermore, *reflective activities*, such as maintaining journals, enable students to record cultural encounters, reflect on language use, and contemplate their attitudes toward Arabic-speaking cultures. It also allows them to share their experiences, challenges, cultural assumptions, biases, and learning based on their intercultural experiences.

Teaching Arabic dialects within the framework of Byram's communicative competence model also offers a holistic approach to language education, aiming to develop learners' linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies. To develop linguistic competence, teachers can conduct dialect vocabulary workshops, focusing on commonly used words or phrases unique to each dialect. This approach grounds the learning experience in everyday situations, reinforcing linguistic skills in relevant contexts. In addition, sociolinguistic competence is nurtured by exposing learners to cultural practices and nonverbal communication associated

with dialect(s). As students learn vocabulary and gestures, teachers can create role-playing scenarios that require students to use the appropriate sociolinguistic behaviors in dialect(s)-specific situations. For instance, simulate a traditional meal setting in a Jordanian home or a marketplace bargaining in an Emirati Souq or a "Sebo'o" (baby shower) in an Egyptian home. Lastly, discourse competence specific to each dialect is developed through activities such as analyzing authentic texts and assigning writing tasks that require students to compose texts in a specific dialect using appropriate discourse markers.

Byram's model encourages dialogue and interaction between different cultural groups. This aligns with the main goal of this paper, which is promoting meaningful communication between Arabic language learners and speakers of the target language to foster a deeper understanding of Arabic-speaking cultures. Finally, Byram's model is not static, and scholars have continued to refine it over the years. Thus, Arabic language educators can incorporate these refinements and adapt the model to better suit the nuances of teaching Arabic and the specific needs of their students.

Integrating Multidialectal and Integrated Approaches: A Pathway to Interconnecting with Intercultural Communicative Competence

The connection between integrated and multidialectal approaches in fostering ICC is notable. Fostering intercultural competence is important in a world that is increasingly characterized by intercultural interactions. Thus, following an integrated or multidialectal approach equips students with the necessary skills required to navigate the complexities of diverse Arabic societies and build positive and respectful relationships with speakers of different dialects. It helps break down stereotypes and prejudices and promote cross-cultural understanding. Azaz and Abourehab (2021) affirm that "multidialectal competence in Arabic is important in building intercultural awareness" (p.91). Younes (2014) believes that an integrated approach prepares students fully for the realities of the Arabic diglossic situation. To achieve this, it is imperative for AFL programs to integrate Arabic dialect(s) along with MSA into their curriculum. This approach represents an innovative approach to language pedagogy that promotes learners' ICC through authentic language instruction (Al-Batal, 2017).

Arabic dialects serve as identity markers and provide profound insights into the identities, culture, lives, and societies of Arabic speakers (Al-Batal, 2017; Haeri, 2003). Despite commonalities across Arab cultures, regional dialects represent unique cultural and community identities, offering students diverse perspectives on Arab history, society, and culture (Salameh, 2018). Learning Arabic dialects enhances students' understanding of the cultural richness

within the Arab world, challenging the notion of a monolithic Arab culture. It helps students become more culturally sensitive and aware of the intricacies of different societies.

AFL students who learned Arabic dialect(s) found them beneficial in improving their understanding of Arab cultures (Al-Batal, 2017). Most study abroad studies show that students who learned to use Arabic dialect(s) appropriately had "unique learning opportunities as well as insights into and an understanding of the culture that would otherwise have been missed" (Shiri, 2015, p. 543). Shiri (2015) found that learning Arabic dialect supported students' development of ICC, and students could carry out a huge number of higher-level cultural interactions through Arabic dialects, while MSA played a secondary role in lower-level interactions.

Arabic language instruction is expected to align with students' specific needs. The main purpose of AFL students in the US to study Arabic is to interact with other Arabic language speakers, and the second purpose is to better understand Arab culture (Belnap, 2006). In another investigation, almost all AFL learners agree that they want to learn Arabic to meet and converse with more Arabic speakers and travel to Arab countries (Husseinali, 2006). Thus, pedagogical approaches should improve students' dialectal skills to prepare them to converse with Arabic speakers and enhance their intercultural competence.

To be intercultural speakers in Arabic dialect(s), AFL learners need to operate their linguistic competence of Arabic dialect(s) and sociolinguistic awareness of the social systems and patterns of behavior, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, and values in Arab culture. To work towards the vision of an integrated or multidialectal intercultural approach, AFL teachers need to avoid introducing Arabic dialect(s) in the form of a list of vocabulary and assume that ICC is achieved through short paragraphs about the target culture or lists of cultural places, things, and events. It is recommended that AFL teachers not assume that students' presentations or written research about the target culture and different spoken dialects are enough to achieve an integrated or multidialectal intercultural competence. Instead, teachers can consider implementing the following strategies to help students develop a more profound understanding of Arabic dialect(s) and intercultural competence:

- Incorporate authentic materials that offer a genuine view of language use and cultural practices, such as news articles, videos, music, and social media content in Arabic dialect(s). These contents can easily be shared and accessed through a social media group that teachers can establish and dedicate to Arabic language learners. This platform can serve as a space for teachers to share interactive culture and dialect-related content and a space for students to interact, share experiences, and practice typing and speaking

through posted videos in Arabic dialects. Use social media posts as an opportunity to stimulate open discussions, language exchange, and cultural exchange with their classmates or with native speakers on social media platforms. Organize language challenges or quizzes on social media to encourage active participation and learning. For example, post idioms in an Arabic dialect, prompting students to identify the dialect, meaning, and cultural significance of the idiom. Challenge students to create short videos or posts in a particular dialect or describe the history and meaning of specific cultural practices. Students can complete the quizzes or challenges individually or in pairs with each other or with native speakers virtually. Encourage students to create their own blogs to share their language learning journey, experiences, and cultural insights. Maintain accessibility for former students to contribute, utilizing their advanced insights and experiences to motivate current students. Tag posts according to dialects and cultural content for easy reference by current and future.

- Encourage students to engage in face-to-face or virtual interactive language use, such as role-plays, debates, and conversations, that incorporate Arabic dialect(s). Select or design a text (e.g., conversational excerpt or dialogue) relevant to students' level and learning objective, discussing and analyzing its vocabulary, grammar, and cultural elements. After ensuring that students understand the text thoroughly, organize role-play scenarios using the content of the text, encouraging memorization for dialect acquisition and retention. In subsequent role-play scenarios, incorporate the original text along with new content, encouraging students to revisit and expand upon it, integrating new vocabulary, grammar, and cultural insights. Each time the text is recycled, introduce new content. Encourage students to practice the role-play with native speakers face-to-face or virtually for real-life pronunciation and accent exposure. This approach ensures continuous knowledge building, vocabulary expansion, and dialectal skill development, providing consistent exposure to the same content and fostering comfort with the dialect(s). Memorization aids with vocabulary retention, helping students use these worlds in real-life conversations. Role-plays provide practical language use, enabling students to understand how the dialect(s) function in everyday interactions. Revisiting the same text and incorporating new content allows for a deeper exploration of cultural nuances associated with the dialect(s).

- Raise awareness about the historical, sociolinguistic, and cultural factors that have shaped the dialect(s) in the Arabic-speaking world. Understanding the roots of these variations can lead to a deeper appreciation of diversity. This is a topic that students can discuss with native speakers virtually.

Sometimes cultural elements are presented theoretically without incorporating activities that encourage students to interact with Arabic speakers in real-life contexts in which they use dialect(s) and demonstrate intercultural skills. Therefore, AFL teachers need to help immerse learners in an experiential learning environment by providing ample tasks in and out of the classroom in a student-centered environment where their cognition and feelings are recognized as important roles in the acquisition of Arabic dialect(s) and intercultural competence. ICC development should include students' emotions and feelings towards the target culture and the ability to manage and regulate these emotions and feelings in intercultural interactions (Dervin, 2016). Therefore, multidialectal or integrated intercultural learning to promote ICC should involve self-reflection, where learners' emotions, self-perceptions, thoughts, and feelings toward the target culture and language play a role. The following are some examples of how self-reflection can be integrated into this approach.

- Encourage students to keep reflective journals to record their thoughts and feelings (moments of frustration, curiosity, excitement, and cultural insights) about their experiences with the Arabic dialect(s) and the target culture.
- Design lessons or discussions around emotionally charged topics related to the Arab world, such as exploring cultural stereotypes, political conflicts, or misconceptions. Encourage students to participate in Arabic-speaking cultural events or engage in conversation with guest speakers or native speakers of different dialects. Afterward, teachers can ask them to reflect on how they felt during these encounters and what they learned.
- Present students with scenarios involving intercultural encounters in which emotions and perceptions are important, such as the difference between grief and death in Arab culture and their culture. Encourage learners to consider how they would feel and respond in those situations, both linguistically and emotionally.

By incorporating self-reflection and recognizing the role of emotions and self-perceptions, learners can develop a deeper, more meaningful connection to the Arabic language culture. This approach can help them acquire linguistic competence and become more effective and empathetic intercultural communicators.

What is Telecollaboration?

One of the effective ways to apply a multidialectal or integrated intercultural approach to teaching Arabic is through telecollaboration projects. Telecollaboration is one of the technological tools that has been used in the field of language education to promote the development of language skills and ICC. O'Dowd (2012) defined telecollaboration as "the application of online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in

geographically distant locations to develop their foreign language skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work" (p.1).

There is a growing interest in telecollaboration; it has been employed and researched in foreign language contexts for over three decades (O'Dowd, 2018). It has been referred to as internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education (Belz & Thorne, 2006), online intercultural exchange (OIE) (O'Dowd, 2007), virtual exchange (Helm, 2016), collaborative online International Learning (COIL) (Rubin, 2016). This paper focuses on telecollaboration as an approach that involves collaborative online projects between learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is carried out through asynchronous platforms such as email exchanges and social media or synchronous platforms such as Skype and Zoom.

Since the late 1990s, there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of integrating intercultural and sociocultural elements in foreign language education; therefore, intercultural telecollaboration has emerged as a tool that facilitates the implementation of both intercultural and language learning (O'Dowd, 2016). Intercultural telecollaboration is perceived as an efficient way to develop learners' foreign language skills and ICC through activities that engage learners with speakers of the target language in culturally related discussions in which they analyze "parallel cultural texts" or carry out ethnographic interviews or compare and contrast between their culture and the target culture (O'Dowd, 2016, p.294). These online exchanges can also occur through fun activities such as multiplayer online games or public discussion forums with online multicultural communities.

Benefits of Using Telecollaboration to Promote ICC
Today, the role of telecollaboration in the intercultural turn in foreign language education is undeniable (Thorne, 2003). It is a practical approach that rejects any mere or passive transfer of information through videos, files, or presentations about the target culture (O'Dowd, 2016; Thorne, 2003). Instead, it creates an active, collaborative, and student-centered intercultural learning environment in which learners engage in critical, authentic intercultural dialogues that allow them to reflect on their own culture and other cultures (O'Dowd, 2016).

Using Byram's (1997) ICC model, many researchers have investigated and analyzed ICC development through learners' telecollaborative exchanges. Over the years, telecollaboration research has shown the potential to improve learners' linguistic skills and ICC, leading researchers to confirm and support its use within foreign language and culture classrooms (O'Dowd, 2018). For example, telecollaborative activities supplement real-life necessary

interactive materials that are not available nor feasible in traditional textbooks, such as first-hand cultural observations and interactions with real audiences from the target culture (Lee & Markey, 2014). These first-hand authentic interactions present learners with multiple eye-opening perspectives that develop language learners' ICC (Schenker, 2012) and encourage learners to critically reflect on their perspectives and those of others (Jauregi et al., 2011). Exchanges of culturally rich topics develop learners' skills to become independent learners and allow them to communicate properly, pose meaningful questions, and respectfully respond to others' questions through telecollaborative communication (Vurdien & Puranen, 2016). Telecollaborators possess qualities vital for cultural immersion, such as tolerance, interest, open-mindedness, curiosity about diverse perspectives, discovery skills, and willingness to communicate with others (Alghasab & Alvarez-Ayure, 2021; Ware & Kessler, 2016). They show a better understanding of their own and their partners' cultures, a willingness to learn about other cultures, an eagerness to accept other cultures, and a flexibility to adapt their behaviors and acceptably customize them in the target culture (Toscu & Erten, 2020). It was evident that telecollaborators showed a willingness to embrace cultural differences, openness to others, enhanced learning motivation, interest in learning how other cultures operate and communicate in business settings, and willingness to cooperate with interlocutors from other cultures (Loch & Pal, 2020).

There was also an apparent increase in recognition, revelation, and preparedness to share work in group activities (Bennacer & Kaouache, 2019). Even exchanges that showed conflicting points of view among students were perceived as an opportunity that triggered further intercultural competence and transformation (Helm et al., 2012). On the other hand, some students showed politeness to avoid conflicts, identified ethnocentric perspectives, and mediated between conflicting interpretations (Angelova & Zhao, 2016; Schenker, 2012). For instance, students considered cultural prototypes and dealt with cultural barriers by challenging existing stereotypes through mutual negotiations (Chen & Yang, 2016). These fruitful cross-cultural dialogues allow language learners to develop critical consciousness to counter possible cultural hegemony or power relations (Chen & Yang, 2016). Therefore, teachers are encouraged to broaden students' horizons by engaging them in intercultural exchanges that will help them move from cultural ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism (Helm et al., 2012).

Telecollaboration can also provide an alternative to study abroad. Study abroad programs can be expensive, only affordable and suitable for some students (Trentman, 2021). Furthermore, many study-abroad programs have been discouraged and abruptly ended due to the pandemic. Additionally, the increased political turbulence in certain Arab countries discourages AFL

learners from considering physical travel to these regions. In light of these challenges, students might find themselves questioning the feasibility and safety of studying in the Middle East. Consequently, telecollaboration emerges as a practical alternative, ensuring that students who may have reasons for not physically traveling abroad still have access to valuable intercultural experiences. It provides an equal opportunity for students to engage in cross-cultural exchanges, bridging geographical and financial barriers that might otherwise limit their exposure to the Arabic language and culture.

Virtual exchanges through telecollaborative activities can mimic aspects of study abroad experience (Hilliker, 2020). Students need practical opportunities to apply what they have learned in class (McTighe & O'Connor, 2005), and virtual exchange can help students who cannot travel benefit from the rich experience of meaningful culture and language exchanges (Chaudhuri, 2011).

In sum, telecollaborative intercultural activities help learners appreciate their own cultural identity, beliefs, and attitudes while developing the adequate skills needed to investigate and understand their perceptions of other people's cultural identities. Telecollaboration can foster effective cross-cultural communication or discussions to overcome miscommunication that can occur due to cultural differences that manifest in different body language, thoughts, norms, and values. Consequently, it fosters greater trust among interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds, enabling reciprocal exchanges of culturally related points of view and information, which play a key role in developing students' skills to become independent learners. With the increase in student mobilizations, telecollaboration studies increasingly encompass pluricultural contexts rather than being limited to one or two cultures (Chun, 2019). Using multimodal multicultural interactions is, in particular, beneficial in AFL contexts. Since Arabic is a multidialectal language, telecollaborative activities do not have to be confined between two cultures. It is necessary to include Arab collaborators from different Arab countries, exposing learners to more than one dialect and the multi-cultures associated with these dialects.

How can telecollaboration help students learn dialect(s)?
Telecollaborative activities do not only lead to intercultural growth but also linguistic improvements in pronunciation and awareness of linguistic variations. Although Arabic literature on the effect of telecollaboration of Arabic as a multidialectal language is little, current literature has shown that intercultural exchanges can be a promising pedagogy to help expose AFL students to Arabic dialect(s). Trentman (2018) is the only researcher who delved

into the impact of telecollaboration on the ICC of AFL students. In her study, she conducted a case analysis involving a telecollaboration initiative linking an Arabic language learner in the United States with a native Egyptian speaker in Egypt. Results showed that telecollaboration provided the participant with cultural knowledge and allowed him to learn lexical items in the Egyptian dialect and led to discussing topics beyond the classroom content and at a higher proficiency level. In a recent study, Trentman (2022) addressed the role of language ideologies in shaping the experience of 51 U.S. learners of Arabic in a study abroad project in Egypt and a telecollaboration project in Jordan. Results revealed that students expressed monolingual ideologies of language, shaping their expectations for language learning in the study abroad and telecollaboration projects. Nevertheless, after examining students' physical and virtual experiences, the author concluded that there is a high plurilingual nature of these spaces, which creates tensions that limit students' language learning.

There is more research on telecollaboration and multidialectal awareness in languages other than Arabic. For example, the relationship between telecollaboration and Spanish as a multidialectal language has been studied. Telecollaborative exchanges have proven to allow students to explore and notice lexical, phonetic, and social variations between peninsular and Latin American Spanish (Lee & Markey, 2014). Based on studies on Spanish variations, telecollaboration showed beneficial effects on the development of L2 learners' dialectal or variety awareness. Intercultural conversations in informal contexts allow learners to practice their less formal, everyday used varieties of peninsular Spanish. The conversations intrigued Spanish learners' interest to comment on controversial linguistic issues rather than focusing only on cultural topics. The discussions showed a shift in learners' interest from discussing cultural topics alone to also discussing aspects related to lexical variations of the target language, such as lexical variations in different regions, various pronunciations, and accents used by Spanish speakers in different geographic areas with distinct cultural identities, and colloquial and idiomatic expressions used in everyday life through casual speaking. For example, Spanish and English learners discussed lexical items used in León, Spain, whereas the American students talked about words, phrases, and accents peculiar to Boston and New England. Eventually, they created a podcast to share their newly learned variational knowledge to expose other learners to variational and cultural sources related to native speakers used in natural everyday contexts.

In a similar example related to the variations in the Spanish language, Diaz and Callahan (2020) call for developing culturally responsive pedagogies and textbooks that address the problem of teaching Standard Spanish to heritage speakers rather than Latin American varieties that

continue to be subordinate to the more prestigiously perceived Peninsular variety. She argues that employing monoglossic views of language and teaching written registers of the prestige variety of Spanish can be problematic and socially unjust.

Furthermore, research on Chinese as a multi-dialectal language has shown similar effects. For instance, the authentic opening and closing of conversational interactions used in everyday conversations are essential linguistic routines that show different types of social and interpersonal relationships (Grant & Starks, 2001). Based on research on telecollaboration in the Chinese language learning context, virtual exchanges allowed learners to acquire openings and closings similar to authentic conversations (Zhang, 2014). The online exchanges substituted the monotonous formal rituals of greetings and farewells in Chinese textbooks with ones usually found in natural conversations, thus exposing learners to as much variation as found in real conversations used in informal situations, such as among friends and families (Zhang, 2014). Learners could also transfer the linguistic variations they had learned to real-life communication contexts with native speakers.

Openings and closing are culture-specific and differ in Arabic dialects as well. Therefore, if Arabic learners are taught to start and end a conversation with simple monotonous exchanges, such as "Assalamu Alaykum" and "Wa Alaykum Assalam," without introducing other common greetings, they may run the risk of not understanding these greetings and leave taking expressions, such as "Eh ya sahby" and "salam" in the Egyptian variety for example. In addition, using such terms could also make them appear formal, unfriendly, abrupt.

Based on the above research, one could argue that telecollaboration can increase Arabic learners' multidialectal knowledge and allows them to acquire native-like-sounding discourse. Telecollaboration offers authentic exposure to the target language, giving students ample opportunities to practice speaking. Hence, it exposes participants to the authentic version of the target language, which improves their oral skills in the target language or variety. This authentic exposure also improves language learners' acquisition and understanding of lexicon and grammatical structures related to the target variety (Angelova & Zhao, 2016). It is a pedagogical approach that can expose Arabic learners to the Arabic language and help them transfer their learned skills to authentic contexts, addressing the proficiency challenge they experience due to "a lack of preparation to engage in the local dialects used for everyday social activities" (Trentman, 2018, p. 304). It provides a source for realistic conversational input to AFL learners. It also has sociolinguistic aspects (Helm & Guth, 2010), making it an excellent option to help Arabic language learners notice and learn social factors such as regional, class, and occupational dialect and gender differences in Arabic dialects.

Constraints of telecollaboration

Despite the overwhelmingly positive attitude towards telecollaboration, findings recognized some challenges reported in small-scale studies. There are four levels at which challenges can lead to "failed communication": the individual, classroom, socio-institutional, and interaction (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006, p.625). The individual level indicates learners' level of ICC, factual knowledge, motivations, and expectations. Students inexperienced in intercultural communication lack the necessary skills to engage in telecollaborative intercultural exchanges. Students' lack of knowledge can lead to misinterpretations of messages between interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds. The socio-institutional level refers to factors such as the mediating tech tool and the extent to which it is accessible; incompatible goals or objectives for each side's teacher, differences between partners' academic calendars; differences in teachers' educational backgrounds, different time zones between countries; different cultural-specific assessments; and differences in prestige values that interlocutors hold towards each other's cultures and languages. The interaction level appertains to misunderstandings and tensions due to interlocutors' different cultural backgrounds, communication styles, attitudes, and non-verbal communication. Other challenges can be briefly attributed to the lack of students' willingness to participate, sufficient time, and adequate assessment of ICC.

Overcoming challenges

Teachers' role and intervention are vital to avoid dysfunctional telecollaboration projects and to achieve successful language and culture learning experiences (O'Dowd, 2021; Trentman, 2018). For example, teachers can avoid a breakdown in communication between telecollaborators through purposeful and focused class discussions of messages they plan to send during the exchange (Ware & Kramsch, 2005). Moreover, the use of previous exchange instances as learning material can significantly enhance future student engagement and learning outcomes as they provide invaluable learning opportunities, allowing learners to glean insights from past interactions (Muller-Hartmann & O'Dowd, 2017). In cases where provocative correspondences arise, the teachers' role extends to integrating these occurrences into subsequent classes to encourage critical reflection and deeper learning. Teachers can enhance learners' awareness and skills in crafting impactful and culturally rich online posts. This aspect necessitates meticulous training to enable learners to contribute effectively and thoughtfully to the exchange and wisely agree on the many aspects of the exchange (O'Dowd & Eberbach, 2004). AFL teachers also need to comprehend their significant contributions to telecollaborative activities as monitors, guides, supporters, organizers, coaches, sources, and resources. It is important for teachers to build a good relationship with teachers involved in telecollaboration projects; create a consensus between students' and teachers' wants and needs

regarding the dialect(s) in use and the covered cultural topic; conduct pre-exchange briefings to prepare learners for possible technical issues; and provide factual knowledge about their partners' cultural backgrounds and dialect(s).

Conclusion and Future Implications

This paper has explored the dynamic and multifaceted landscape of Arabic language education within the context of its multidialectal nature, focusing on the integration of ICC through the innovative medium of telecollaboration. As Arabic language studies continue to be popular, particularly in the US, it is imperative to equip learners with linguistic proficiency, cultural insights, and intercultural skills necessary for effective communication in an interconnected world. "Students do not want to be spoon-fed. They want exposure to the living, breathing Arabic of today" (Belnap, 2006, p.176). Therefore, it is necessary to move beyond the traditional teaching-only-MSA approach and incorporate dialectal Arabic to avoid increasing students' frustration when encountering unfamiliar varieties. When exposed to the local culture and dialect(s), students exhibited greater motivation, improved retention, reduced drop-out rates, and covered course material more comprehensively (Sneed, 2012). This can be attributed to students' natural tendency to engage with the language varieties they can use in conversations with native speakers and to the MSA used in writing.

Telecollaboration, with its use of online communication tools to bring together language learners from different countries, has proven to be a promising approach for exposing Arabic learners to the richness of Arabic dialect(s) and the diverse cultures associated with each dialect. Using telecollaboration fosters intercultural growth by engaging students in meaningful intercultural exchanges, allows learners to develop a more nuanced understanding of the Arabic language and culture, and become more effective communicators in Arabic-speaking contexts. Promoting ICC among Arabic language learners is paramount, especially in a context where international language and communication scholarship tends to favor Eurocentric viewpoints and overlook marginalized non-Western perspectives and discourse (Dervin & Dirba, 2006). Within AFL contexts, telecollaboration can promote global citizenship and intercultural understanding through values and attitudes that empower AFL learners to contribute to societal and global well-being, peace, fairness, and prosperity. By promoting understanding, empathy, and respect for cultural differences in the Arab world, AFL learners can learn how to work together to build a more inclusive and harmonious society, especially in a post-9/11 era.

While telecollaboration may present particular challenges, it offers substantial linguistic and intercultural benefits. Researchers have offered strategies to overcome these challenges,

emphasizing that the potential for enhanced language skills and cultural understanding outweighs the complexities involved.

There are several promising areas for future studies focusing on the use of telecollaboration to promote AFL students' multidialectal and intercultural skills. There is a need for more studies that investigate the impact of telecollaboration on AFL learners' dialect and intercultural proficiencies. Additionally, it is necessary to determine through future research whether the benefits of telecollaboration are sustained over time and how this impacts language and cultural retention. Furthermore, it is important to examine whether telecollaboration can be used to enhance both MSA and dialect learning simultaneously.

There is also a need to evaluate the effectiveness of integrating specific cultural topics (e.g., traditions, celebrations, political issues) into telecollaborative activities to enhance AFL learners' intercultural understanding and measure the influence of these topics on students' attitudes and cultural competence. Finally, exploring the pivotal role of AFL teachers in guiding and supporting students in telecollaborative activities is essential; thus, future AFL research can investigate the training needs of teachers to facilitate meaningful telecollaboration and assess the impact of teacher involvement.

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