Learning the Arabic language in Australia’s Arab communities: Perspectives of young Arabic-speaking Australians on informal and formal opportunities

Abstract

The Arabic language has grown steadily in terms of the number of people speaking it in Australia. However, it needs to be asked: Where and how do the children of Arabic-speaking families learn the language? Arabic is not widely offered in Australian universities or in the school system, so most learning must occur in more informal contexts. We examine informal and formal learning opportunities for young Arabic speakers and identify enabling factors, as well as the many obstacles (often of a wider social nature). We also examine attitudes to language and social issues amongst young Australians of Arabic-speaking background.

1. Introduction

Arabic has been referred to as a significant language of global importance in Australia by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in its 2012 publication, The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Language. It was identified as one of the twelve languages perceived as important for Australia’s economic and political future. This assessment is based not only on the importance of agricultural and commercial trade with a number of the Middle East Arab countries but also on the growing number of Arabic speakers in the Australian population at large. Arabic speakers can be regarded as an important linguistic resource which can enhance Australia’s relationships with the Arab world, provided that the Arabic language potential of the younger generation born in Australia is nurtured and properly developed (Maadad 2009). From the personal perspective of the young Arab-Australians concerned, knowing Arabic has been considered as important for their sense of identity and ability to participate in the life of their family and community. It is important therefore to investigate how and where young people in Australia’s Arab communities learn the Arabic language.

According to the 2011 Australian census, 1.3% of the entire Australian population (287,174 people) spoke Arabic at home (ABS 2011). Excluding English, this makes Arabic the third most frequently spoken language at home, after Mandarin and Italian. The majority of these Arabic speakers were concentrated in New South Wales where Arabic was the language spoken at home by 184,271 people. Victoria had 68,416 speakers and South Australia had a much smaller number with 7,466
speakers. This study investigates the experiences of learning Arabic among a small group of young people from New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. All had been born in Australia to Arabic-speaking parents.

2. Informal and formal learning of Arabic in Australia

A number of studies of Arab migrants in Australia and overseas have drawn attention to the range of informal learning opportunities that are usually available for learning Arabic (Rubino 2010; Sofu 2009; Cruickshank 2008; Bochner 1986). These include the family, the community and peer group contexts, as well as media and technology. Comparatively, the opportunity to study the standard form of Arabic formally through schools and universities has been limited, if not nil, despite attempts to implement the teaching of less commonly taught languages, which included Arabic (see, for example, Dunne and Pavlyshyn 2011, on the tertiary sector). Arabic spoken informally at home is most prevalent in New South Wales and Victoria: both states also provide opportunities to study the language formally at secondary schools. In South Australia, Arabic is also spoken informally at home and there are only a very small number of secondary education providers offering a variety of formal learning possibilities (see below).

Informal learning extends beyond the classroom to include the family, home, workplace, community and society-at-large. This type of learning is never organized nor guided by any rigid curriculum. Frequently it is described as “experiential and spontaneous” (Eaton 2010: 6). Informal learning in the case of Arabic “is simply woven into the fabric of the everyday activities of people’s lives in unpredictable and opportunistic ways” (Bell, Lewenstein, Shouse and Feder 2009: 93). Informal settings therefore allow all learners to engage with ideas and bring their prior knowledge and experiences to bear (Bell et al. 2009: 5). The informal experience of learning Arabic occurs at any time and in any place (Eaton 2010). Those initiating the learning by others are likely to be advanced or native speakers and what is learnt can be regarded as an authentic, conversational language experience (Eaton 2010: 17).

Conversely, the formal learning of languages such as Arabic usually takes place in an organized manner in the context of a school, often following a specific Arabic curriculum or program. Learning organizations, such as schools and universities, are usually recognized by the government and are accredited. Experts and trained professionals often lead the learning, which is assessed and reported in the same way as learning more mainstream foreign languages, such as French. The emphasis is typically on written forms of the language more than spoken (Eaton 2010: 15). However, diverse contexts (‘situations’; Emmitt, Komesaroff and Pollock 2006: 65) such as various locales, speakers and the nature of the Arabic language may also be examined as contributing factors or variations of the language.

In most recent years, the advent of online learning has begun to provide opportunities for systematic formal learning of both oral and written forms of Arabic in the student’s own time (see for example www.arabacademy.com; www.
learnarabiconline.com) in a way that transcends the traditional informal/formal distinction.

### 2.1 Informal home learning of Arabic in Australia

The Arabic language spoken in the Australian community is maintained to a high degree and appears to be very much ‘the language of the home’. Family members actively use Arabic when speaking to each other. Grandparents in particular use only Arabic and this reinforces its use and transmission through the generations. Research has shown that the family and interlocutors are crucial in language maintenance and language choice (Cruickshank 2008). The topic of the conversation and location are also critical factors that support this informal learning process (Rubino 2010). However, research indicates that the extended family, rather than the nuclear family, is most responsible for utilising immigrant languages. The age, gender and generation of the speaker and interlocutor have also been highlighted as important when selecting the language that family members will speak (Rubino 2010). Higher rates of language maintenance occur in older speakers from the first, rather than the second, generation and more commonly in women than men (Rubino 2010). Factors such as marriage patterns and family and social networks are interconnected in the way they support informal learning and use of the Arabic language in Australia (Bochner 1986).

‘Extended family closeness’ supporting the learning of Arabic (Renzaho, McCabe and Sainsbury 2011: 420) is created by members of different generations coming together and preferring to use Arabic (Sofu 2009: 256). This contributes to the preservation and informal learning of cultural values that are deemed to be very important in terms of maintaining traditional values over succeeding generations and supporting language maintenance (Bochner 1986: 420). Where members of the younger generation are bilingual, they tend to continue using Arabic in the home. This is evident when they address their parents and older family members especially if they live with the family (Maadad 2009). There is also evidence suggesting that the home language can be successfully maintained if only one parent is fluent (Clyne 2007; Pauwels 2005) provided that reinforcement occurs with such things as frequent overseas visitors from the home country (Cruickshank 2004; Pauwels 2005). Writing letters or emails in Arabic to overseas relatives can also positively support language use and proficiency.

### 2.2 Informal learning in the Arab community context

Friendships from the same language community can also encourage the regular use of the language by second generation speakers (Rubino 2010). This can take place in many contexts, ranging from cafes, restaurants, clubs and associations (Rubino 2010). Feeling a sense of comfort and belonging where “everyone likes sticking to their own culture” (Mansouri and Trembath 2005: 522) is also derived from speaking and living in neighbourhoods in Arab-Australian communities. Local venues then afford
more language sharing and speaking opportunities in “more Arab communities and everyone gets along and everyone’s family” (Mansouri 2005: 522).

The importance of the church/mosque and their accompanying religious practices within the Arabic-speaking community has reinforced the importance of regularly maintaining the Arabic language and its practices. These institutions, related community groups and the home can offer ‘organized’ occasions for the formal learning and practice of Arabic. Many parents act as mediators of this religious extension of Arabic learning (Cruickshank 2004). Research shows that some Arab parents routinely tell stories from the Qur’an, as well as teach and discuss the Books of the Prophets, particularly during Ramadan, as part of religious observance in the home (Cruickshank 2004, 2008).

Whilst speaking in Arabic can occur in the workplace, it is confined to clients and workmates who are Arabic-speaking. The after-hours Arabic-speaking community language schools also serve as avenues for socialising out-of-hours as well as for formal language maintenance. Furthermore, Arabic is also used socially during primary and secondary school breaks and on the sports fields against other teams (Cruickshank 2008: 284).

2.3 Influence of the media and technology

Informal learning and practice of the Arabic language have surged through use of media and its supporting technology, which are much more globalized, especially in Sydney and Melbourne as a consequence of their large Arabic-speaking populations. Many families have access to 24-hour Arabic channels through cable and satellite television. Watching Arabic language videos, listening to Arabic language FM radio stations and Arabic language music CDs are extremely popular (Cruickshank 2008: 463). The internet represents another context and opportunity for informal learning. Games, word-processing, email, microblogging (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs and Meyer 2010), using mobile devices (Kukulska-Hulme 2009) and communicating in chatrooms in Arabic, all provide meaningful language maintenance and private informal learning activities. In particular, the everyday practice of young people in developing technological proficiency through accessing the internet, can result in ‘expert-like’ practices with digital technologies (Johnson 2009). Communicating in Arabic with family overseas also regularly takes place via telephones and mobiles, by sending recorded audio and video cassettes, and by visiting and staying with relatives. Accessing the news in Arabic through electronic or online technology, reading Arabic language newspapers and subsequently engaging in social discussions all contribute to language use and maintenance (cf. Rubino 2010).

2.4 Evaluating informal learning opportunities of Arabic speakers in Australia

In various informal learning contexts, Arabic learners and speakers experience challenges and rewards, which impact on the quality of their learning. Heritage
language learners generally have positive attitudes and family experiences, especially out of school. As already noted above, having adults such as parents or relatives, reading aloud to children is one example of language transmission and maintenance. Using their heritage language at home can lead to strong oral skills which may become significantly stronger than the literacy skills of these same learners (Carreira and Kagan 2011). Confidence in Arabic, as well as knowledge thereof, assists with family communication, particularly with older relatives, and also makes it easier for people to attend religious services and understand sermons.

However, not all informal learning experiences produce such positive outcomes. The attitudes of some Arabic-speaking parents to learning can limit their children’s learning goals. For these parents oral proficiency in the home is regarded as sufficient for girls. While many can feel as though their children are “doing very, very well” with their learning, they do not encourage a “culture of study” at home (Stevenson and Patty 2011: 1-2). Because of their commitment to Arabic in the home environment, such parents appear to “value short-term solutions rather than the long-term investment in education” based in mainstream Australian culture (Clyne 2005: 305).

3. Formal opportunities for learning Arabic in Australia

In New South Wales, which has the largest number of speakers of Arabic at home in Australia (ABS 2011), formal opportunities for learning Arabic at university level are offered at the University of Sydney, Macquarie University and Charles Sturt University. In addition, there are Vocational and Training Arabic courses as well as the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Institute of Languages offering up to Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Certificate 3 studies in Arabic. At secondary school level, some government schools as well as a number of private Islamic colleges, teach Arabic as a Higher School Certificate (Year 12) subject. Victoria presents similar opportunities to study Arabic formally. The University of Melbourne, Victoria University and Deakin University all have courses in Arabic. At the secondary level, there are, for instance, a number of Arabic community schools, the Victorian School of Languages (a state government school) and a number of private Islamic colleges teaching Arabic to Year 12 level.

In South Australia, where the two authors are based, the Arabic Language is taught at the University of South Australia (UniSA) concurrently with Deakin University while the University of Adelaide’s Professional and Continuing Education (PCE) offers more conversational classes. Two independent schools (Burc College and the Islamic College of South Australia), one government school (the School of Languages) and five ethnic schools teach Arabic at various levels to Year 12.¹ At secondary level in 2012, there were 31 students in Stage 1 Arabic and 21 students in Stage 2 Arabic (Year 12).² In addition, the Arabic Language and Culture Association of South Australia (ALCASA) which was formed in March 2003 to promote and “strengthen the understanding and appreciation for the Arabic language and culture” holds monthly meetings and regular activities such as Arabic conversation classes (ALCASA 2013).
3.1 Evaluating formal schooling opportunities of Arabic speakers

As previously noted, New South Wales and Victoria have the largest numbers of speakers and a greater number of formal schooling opportunities than in South Australia. However, it was noted that in 2001 the Arabic language, whilst featuring the largest numbers of young speakers (0-14 age group) in Australia, was underrepresented “among takers of language subjects” (Clyne 2005). Clyne suggested that the reason was “the lack of emphasis on the mainstreaming... within the communities” (Clyne 2005: 112). A number of factors, such as distance and accessibility, may explain this (see also section 4 below). On the more positive side, in 2014 a draft Framework for Foundation to Year 10 for the Arabic Language was written for the Australian Curriculum (ACARA 2013). New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia are currently adapting and trialling their own versions.

4. Obstacles to be overcome in informal and formal learning of Arabic in Australia

Overall, Arabic-speaking students in Australia suffer significant obstacles that can affect the quality of both their informal and formal learning. Gender (Renzaho et al. 2011; Rubino 2010) and racial or ethnic issues (Rubino 2010; Mansouri and Trembath 2005) are commonly mentioned in the research. Such identity, ethnic and cultural tensions can seriously inhibit quality language teaching. Poynting’s (2009) study highlights the generally low literacy of written Arabic and the dependence more on spoken non-literary Arabic. Parental restrictions, unequal gender division of household duties, sexual labelling, the impact of 9/11 on Muslims’ lives and identity, as well as experiencing discrimination in the wider community, can for young Arabic-speaking women in particular lead to a sense of feeling submissive and inferior compared to their Anglo-Australian counterparts (Poynting 2009). In particular, restrictions imposed by their gender can limit young women’s opportunities for formal learning of Arabic which may be offered in mainstream contexts away from home.

At the same time, for young people the knowledge of Arabic as their home language and their confidence in their proficient use of it, is an important means of countering personal alienation and social breakdown, as will be seen in the subsequent section. Since Arabic is a core value of Arab culture (Smolicz 1999), speaking Arabic is important in reinforcing their personal identity. As Clyne explains, language is central to peoples’ lives. It identifies “people as belonging or not belonging” (Clyne 2007: 3.2). Language manifests cultural values and is “the key to revealing our cultural values and understanding those of others” (Clyne 2007: 3.2). Questions arise as to how schools which offer formal learning and literacy in Arabic can overcome the obstacles impacting on the Arabic-speaking students, particularly in the formal learning context.
5. Research methodology

In order to understand better the factors which interact and influence formal and informal learning of Arabic amongst young Australians of Arabic descent, we conducted our own research on the topic, some results of which are presented in the sections that follow. This is based on some of the qualitative data from a larger mixed-method study done by Maadad (2009). The data analysed here relate to how informal and formal learning contributes to the use of Arabic language, the impact and rewards that Arabic speakers experience and the challenges with family and culture, language, core values and gender. The data collection method included face-to-face interviews, case studies and questionnaires. A total of thirty respondents (15 males and 15 females) took part in the study: all of them were born in Australia to parents of Arab descent. They were from different religious backgrounds (Muslims, Druze and Christians) and were selected through personal and professional contacts. All participants were queried within the context of the family and their cultural, social and educational milieu. This made it possible to understand people’s perceptions of how a minority culture could be integrated into mainstream culture. To do so meant listening to people’s viewpoints and stories of their families and in their own personal spaces. It also provided respondents with the freedom to talk openly about whatever they wished to in their own environment and time.

This approach has been influenced by the principles of humanistic sociology which seek to investigate the feelings, approaches, attitudes and self-reflections that individuals have in order to analyse the culture of their society and environment (Smolicz 1999). According to Smolicz, humanistic sociology envisages a group’s culture as made up of the cultural meaning or values which are shaped by members of a given group in various aspects of life, such as politics, economics, law, religion, language, family, friendship, food, festivities and music. He argued that in each ethnic group some values emerged as vital to their existence and to its members’ sense of belonging to that group. His research indicated that for some groups, such as Polish, Ukrainian and Latvian, their language represented such core values. In other groups such as the Irish or Jews, religious practices and beliefs were the core values (Smolicz 1979, 1999). The evaluation of language depends completely on the individual group members and, as they go through the stages of life, they tend to reflect differently on their feelings and consciousness. In this study, the principles of humanistic sociology were followed in examining respondents’ experiences by analysing their points of view, as well as pointing to the social, cultural and educational outcomes.

6. Results and discussion

The perspectives on formal and informal opportunities for learning Arabic among a group of young Arabic-Australians, aged 15 to 24, are presented in the subsequent section. Informal opportunities for learning Arabic arose from interaction with family and friends whilst formal opportunities came from weekend community schools. In discussing these formal and informal opportunities, enabling factors and obstacles...
to learning Arabic will be identified, as well as the respondents’ attitudes towards Arabic and related social issues.

It must be noted that the expression ‘Arab identity’ has been widely used in the Western world when referring to a Muslim person, even though not all Arabs are Muslims. Some follow the Maronite, Orthodox and Druze religions. Furthermore, most Muslims are not Arabs and live in non-Arab countries (AbuKhalil 1993), such as Iran. Having clarified this, the Arabic language serves as a thread that links these Arabian cultures. At the same time, frequent association (if not confusion) between ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’ occurs in general public opinion and media reporting in Australia (as elsewhere) and needs to be borne in mind when evaluating comments from our respondents.

6.1 Learning Arabic from family and friends

The Arab community stresses the importance of family and friends. Being close to one’s family and friends highlights a sense of security, belonging and familiarity. Maadad (2009) highlighted the fact that a large number of Arabic-speaking immigrants experienced psychological challenges and indeed serious problems as a result of losing their connection with their family and friends in their home country. One important theme that emerged out of the questionnaire responses was that of family values. Respondents commented positively that they have obligations and duties to uphold towards their parents and they seemed keen to keep the family together. Language was often explicitly identified by respondents as important in this context. One comment in particular even connected family to language over the life cycle by saying:

*I wanted to speak the Arabic language properly in case my parents lost the English language later on in life like our next door neighbour who lived in Australia for most of his life and now since he has got Alzheimer’s he can only speak Arabic.*

A series of questions in both the questionnaire and the interview sought to probe the respondents’ use of informal Arabic language and its importance to them. All of the respondents could understand and speak Arabic, although there was a considerable difference in their respective competence. According to most respondents the informal learning of the Arabic language seemed to strengthen their identity and maintain their culture. Respondents were asked a series of related questions: (1) whether they chose to speak Arabic; (2) how comfortable they felt when speaking it; (3) whether speaking the language was a priority for them; and (4) how much influence family and friends had on the speaking of Arabic and its relationship to their identity. Choosing to speak Arabic was identified as very important for the majority of respondents and, of the many reasons given, the most important, if not the most basic, was that many respondents stated that they found it was the language of family communication. The following responses illustrate this:

*It is my family’s first language. I want to speak it well.*
I choose to speak Arabic because it is private to us and my kids feel special knowing another language.

Others indicated that they choose to speak Arabic because it has a degree of personal identification that allows them privacy and yet gives them the freedom to merge their origins with an Australian identity:

When I speak it in front of my friends who are not Arabian, it gives me a specific identification with my origin and family, which protects my privacy.

Being an Australian, but having parents from Arab background, I seem to have my parents’ culture and can understand well everything they say to me in Arabic. Still, I always answer back speaking to them in Arabic.

Furthermore, the importance of choosing to speak Arabic was fuelled by the pleasure of one’s parents and partners who were from that culture. The language reinforced their sense of identity and their commitment to transmitting their culture successfully to the next generation. The parents and partners could understand conversations more easily.

My parents seem to understand it better and faster.

My husband accepts it with more ease and pleasure and finds it more truthful. And intimate he says.

A few respondents considered that the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent Bali bombings had changed the way that Australian people think of Arabs generally. They said that they started to notice racial comments and a few found that they were excluded from mainstream school social activities. Perceptions were especially negative in relation to visual markers, such as Muslim women or girls wearing scarves, or men with beards. It is noteworthy that the respondents born in Australia were also most forthcoming in discussing the changes in how they were treated since the terrorist attacks. In fact, such fears raised concerns about speaking Arabic in public and a few changed their names and their children’s names while in public. One parent reacted to the events by refraining from taking his children to school:

I could not call my son Mohammad in public with ease any more. We started calling him Mark.

I stopped sending my kids to school for few days after the horrific event of 9/11. I was too scared that they [‘Muslim-haters’ in this respondent’s view] react here in the Islamic school.

These comments, among others, reveal the participants’ fear of speaking Arabic in public to avoid attracting attention to their identity. This fear often arises as a result of news reports that may negatively portray Arabic-speakers. Such concerns have been raised by a number of respondents, who saw these events and news reports as obstacles to expressing themselves in Arabic in public places.
Thus, in informal settings of interaction with family and friends, one enabling factor to learn and speak Arabic involves social support of family and friends in maintaining connection with their homeland and the Arabian culture. The ability to closely connect with family and friends in Australia and overseas provides opportunities for Arabic language speakers to shape their cultural identity and preserve social privacy. On the other hand, there is one obstacle that impedes learning of Arabic which is influenced by social conditions beyond the control of the respondents: the media’s portrayal of hostile and violent Arab Muslims. Despite this obstacle, the respondents’ attitude towards learning and speaking the Arabic language is positive and has more benefits for them than the perceived risks of speaking Arabic in public.

6.2 Learning Arabic in the community and schools

It is evident that, regarding educational values and the importance of learning informal and formal Arabic, there are differences between the educational values of Arabic speakers and those of the mainstream Anglo-Celtic population in Australia. Those of the former have in some cases been influenced by public reaction that often incorporated beliefs, stereotypes and conflicts represented or promoted in the media. For this reason, a number of respondents felt that it was important to learn Arabic in school—as pointed out by one respondent:

*I think if I was a teacher, I will bring Arabic language to schools and talk about the fascinating Arab culture and show the world the positive sides of being an Arab instead of the stereotyping the whole world seem to hold on to.*

Most schools that offer the Arabic language in South Australia, as elsewhere in Australia, tend to connect it to religious ties, for example, the previously mentioned Burcs College and the Islamic College in South Australia. Many respondents articulated the religious importance of learning Arabic in formal settings as represented by the following responses:

*Years ago, I used to argue about having to keep up the Arabic language, especially reading and writing with my parents... Now I know there would have been no chance for me to read or write if I did not continue on with the weekend school. There will be no way that I could keep up with the religion reading if I didn’t learn.*

*By losing the language you will lose the value of your religion. How can you read [Quran] and understand. It is not the same if someone needs to read to you all the time and even worse, if you couldn’t speak the language too.*

For some respondents, the development of reading and speaking skills in Arabic enabled their engagement with their Islamic religion. Formal learning of Arabic in schools makes it possible for respondents to uphold religious tradition through reading the Quran. Most Muslims prefer to maintain the reading of their Holy Book.
in its original language, Arabic. Hence, learning the language gave them the ability to
demonstrate their faithful commitment to their religion.

This religious zeal, oftentimes, has been associated with violence and terrorism
in Arab countries as projected by the media. Some respondents’ assessment of
the importance of learning Arabic in schools also revealed the genuine and strong
feelings that have surfaced among Arab-Australians concerning the perceived
damage and generalisation done by the media to Islamic and Arab peoples because
of their beliefs. The following illustrates this:

*Maybe the media should concentrate a little more on the good things instead of
the negative... broadcasting to the world. People can only know what they see
and have been taught. This is unfortunate.*

In line with what has been mentioned, frustration with media representation about
Arab nations led many respondents to articulate the importance of teaching Arabic
and the Arabian culture in schools, to bridge the gap brought about by differences in
the education system in Australia and the Arab culture. The following illustrate this:

*So many ask me, why can’t we have Arabic at school like Spanish, Japanese and
Chinese?*

*Education is a necessity for everyone in order to understand one another and
appreciate different cultures and values. I wish something gets done soon about
this.*

Teaching Arabic, whether in informal or formal settings, was confirmed by most
participants as important to understanding Arabic culture and dispelling the media’s
negative representation of Arab nations. However, it is also important to highlight the
fact that the spoken informal Arabic language is very different to the formal language
normally taught in any school setting. Second generation Arab-Australian children
can find formal Arabic difficult to learn, as one respondent pointed out:

*I did not enjoy it [Arabic] at all, it sounded very different to the language I grew
up speaking to my parents.*

*I don’t think it is fair to learn the formal language; they should have teachers to
teach us the informal way of reading and writing.*

Nevertheless, the same respondent did not discount the importance of learning
formal or informal Arabic, as with all other participants whose attitudes towards
Arabic were more positive. Hence, developing Arabic reading and speaking skills
were deemed vital in keeping alive cultural community values and most importantly,
religion.

*I am so glad that I kept the language with my folks because I enjoy very much
the functions that are held here in Australia for the Arab community. I love the
singing and dancing night and enjoy the traditional life.*
Keeping the language is preserving a whole nation, culture and religion. It is important to speak it all the time to preserve our identity.

Despite the problems, formal learning of Arabic in schools provides second-generation Arab-Australians opportunities for deeper understanding and engagement with their culture and religion. And as some respondents made clear, this opportunity could also be an avenue for cultural understanding among non-Arabic speakers.

7. Conclusions

The foregoing discussion on opportunities for Australian-born youth learning Arabic has highlighted the importance of interaction with family and friends as critical informal settings in learning the Arabic language. The majority of the respondents confirmed that the informal learning of the Arabic language created a sense of balance between Arab culture and family values in the more private domains of living and the English language and Australian political, economic and legal values in public life.

The Arab families of these participants also placed great importance on traditional cultural values, including the role of language maintenance. The Arabic language serves to perpetuate the community’s values and identity. Due to the greater assimilation to mainstream cultural values which typically occurs with the second and third generation of migrants, families have feared losing their children to Australian (i.e. Western) culture. That is why the older generation emphasised the importance of retaining the ‘original’ Arab language, religion, social connections and family traditions.

Weekend schools provide important formal opportunities for learning Arabic. Community reading of the Quran for Muslim and Druze respondents made it important to develop skills in reading and writing Arabic. There was also an overwhelming consensus among the respondents regarding the desire to have the Arabic language taught in mainstream schools for greater cultural understanding.

Participants revealed a duality in their personal cultural systems, in that they included both Arab and mainstream Anglo-Australian values combined in a variety of ways. However, positive attitudes toward the maintenance of the Arabic language for family and community life predominated. Enabling factors, such as social support and interaction with family, as well as development of reading and speaking skills in Arabic to effectively engage in religion, were identified. One concern among the participants, though, was the negative media representation of Arab nations as one compelling obstacle to communicating in Arabic in public spheres. Still, greater cultural awareness needs to be developed to allow different languages, people and cultures to thrive harmoniously in one society.

Notes

1. Information about the availability of Arabic in schools has been drawn from the websites of the Association of Independent Schools of South Australia (www.
the Ethnic Schools Association of South Australia (www.esasa.asn.au), the (South Australian) School of Languages (www.schooloflanguages.sa.edu.au) and the South Australian Certificate of Education (www.sace.sa.edu.au).


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