Culture is a Cornerstone of Language Teaching:

Incorporating Culture into Arabic Language Classes for Non-Native Speakers



Samah Younis Al-Khateeb

Teaching Assistant of Arabic Language, Arabic for Non-Native Speakers Center, College of Arts and Sciences – Qatar University

Culture offers tremendous opportunities for language education by presenting, discussing, and translating language into real-life situations that are relevant to students and reflect the details of daily life. The researcher examined the presentation of Arab culture in Arabic as a second language classrooms, using modern, specific strategies that balance theoretical and practical aspects. The research addressed culture, its scope, its importance, the purpose of teaching it, and its close relationship with teaching Arabic as a second language; the strength of this relationship is reflected in the fact that culture is a vibrant element that seamlessly bridges the learning process to acquisition.

The study then addressed the latest strategies for teaching culture and detailed how to apply them in the classroom. The study concluded that it is important to address culture in Arabic language classrooms for non-native speakers, and that teachers must be familiar with the various cultural intersections and differences, given their significant impact on enhancing learners' communicative and intellectual competence. It also emphasized the need to equip learners with diverse educational skills that extend beyond language to its social and cultural dimensions.

Why is culture important, and why should it be included in linguistic content?

Every person has his own system of expression and communication. We see that people gradually adopt certain modes of expression and verbal and physical gestures until they become a distinctive characteristic of those people compared to others. This system becomes a source of fascination or aversion for other people. As teachers, we cannot ignore these aspects, for they form the foundation on which the target language is built during the learning journey. This foundation offers the language learner significant benefits, saving them considerable time and effort in the learning process, and revealing a profound insight into the life cycle of the language—an insight that cannot be attained without knowledge and understanding of these cultural cues.

Thus, no matter how many hours the learner spends studying the language and practicing its skills, they will not be able to sense the spirit of the texts they read and hear or reach their true essence. Claire Kramsch (A leading scholar in the fields of applied linguistics and foreign language teaching) expressed this point precisely when she said: "Culture is a potential source of conflict; in the context of language learning, it is not a fifth skill that can be dispensed with in the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing."

The relationship between culture and language manifests in mutual influence, which is reflected in linguistic, physical, and intellectual communication; culture enhances communicative

competence and makes the learner a living part of the language they are learning, connected to it, capable of grasping concepts and vocabulary by decoding their cultural symbols.

How Should Culture Be Introduced in Arabic Language Classes for Non-Native Speakers?

The Arabic language is characterized by its cultural diversity and authenticity, which must serve as a foundation when discussing the presentation of cultural aspects in Arabic language classes for non-native speakers. It is worth noting the distinctiveness of Arab-Islamic culture and its unique characteristics, which necessitate that a set of objectives be prioritized when teaching Arabic as a second language.

It is essential to consider how to present culture to learners in a way that mirrors the social reality of the Arab people, their rich history, and the civilizations that have flourished on their land, as well as the intellectual and religious diversity that enriches and strengthens society. These methods must therefore leverage the sociocultural context in language instruction to facilitate learning, with the primary focus on educational situations that serve this purpose.

These methods include activities such as field visits to markets, homes, and workplaces, as well as visiting patients or nursing homes. We find that some people enter homes without removing their shoes, while in other homes shoes must be removed at the door; both practices reflect a culture interpreted according to the linguistic group, particularly the second type, which aims to maintain the purity of the home during prayer, and attending events, including houses of mourning, weddings, and religious and national holidays, as well as role-playing, where the learner engages in cultural tasks such as offering congratulations at a wedding, or during religious holidays and personal occasions, and offering sympathy and condolences in cases of death.

Another approach is inquiry-based learning, where learners are tasked with researching a specific issue in society while considering the social norms of that community and one of the beautiful preconceptions that I find distinctive is the preconception test, in which learners are asked to write a description of the culture they are studying—such as Arab family relationships—and each learner records their observations, and then we ask them to investigate all these perceptions from their sources using available reliable resources, and then we ask them to compare the perceptions they have gathered on those issues.

What are the most important strategies for introducing culture in Arabic language classes for non-native speakers?

1. **Use authentic texts and materials.** These texts or materials must be drawn from the daily life of the target language community, as if the learners were living naturally within it and encountering the language spontaneously.
2. **Encouraging students to discuss culture.** The best method for this strategy might involve showing a short video clip and asking students to write down words related to the topic, then moving on to a discussion of the ideas presented, drawing on their prior knowledge to produce language in a natural context.
3. **Bridging the cultural gap.** The teacher should take specific steps to reduce misunderstandings arising from the concepts and ideas conveyed by educational curricula and other resources presented to the learner.
4. **Cross-cultural comparison.** Leveraging the learner's cultural background and knowledge of the customs and traditions associated with their native language to create a shared approach across different cultures enhances second language learning.
5. **Role-playing.** Role-playing ensures that learners engage closely with cultural situations, leading to a deeper understanding of social concepts and practices.

In conclusion, to strengthen this relationship between culture and language, which is a requirement in the field of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers, it was necessary to focus on strategies for conveying and presenting them to the learner in a way that is closer to natural acquisition. This ensures that the learning process achieves linguistic and cultural immersion—a goal sought in most second-language learning programs—without which the learner cannot achieve communicative competence in the community of that language.