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Teaching Arabic Literature to Foreign Language Learners as a Medium to Bridge Cultural Gap

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Abstract
Teaching literature to foreign language learners provide, amongst others, helping students to understand and appreciate other cultures different from their own. To determine how desirable outcomes can be achieved in using Arabic as a foreign language classroom, this article provides a review of the relevant scholarly literature concerning teaching literature to foreign language learners in general and as a medium to bridge the gap between cultures in particular. Based on the author's experiences using Arabic to demonstrate the role literature classes can play in improving students' cultural-linguistic competence, this article argues that effective communication requires language proficiency and cultural competence in equal measures. It shows that it is impossible to achieve functional fluency in one without similar achievement in the other. If done well, the study of literature will lead to increased empathy with

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and respect for the language community, improve students' motivation and make them more effective communicators in the target language.

Keywords
Arabic, Literature, Foreign language learners, Culture, Language, Teaching, Competence, Norms and expectations.

Introduction

The Arabic word for literature, *adab*, comes from a word that means "to be well-bred, well-mannered, cultured, and urbane, have refined taste" and signifies politeness, sophistication and enrichment.[1] Arabic literature emerged in the sixth century. It now comprises a rich literary corpus that spans over 16 centuries and includes a wide range of genres from different eras and geographical zones. Arabic is a Semitic language that is spoken by at least 250 million people around the world. There are two standardised written variants, Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic.[2] The former is the original language used in the Holy Qurʾān, whereas the latter is a modernised version of the former. The two variants are very close. Arabic is a diglossic language, which means that the written variants of the language are not actually spoken by any members of the language community in normal day-to-day situations. The numerous spoken variants of Arabic are not standardised and are generally not used for writing. They are often referred to as dialects and can diverge significantly from the written forms.[3]

1. Hans Wehr, *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Reprinted by Librairie Du Liban, 1980 by special arrangement with Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1961, 1966, 1971, 1974).
2. Charles A. Ferguson, "Diglossia," *Word* 15 (1959): 325–340.
3. Sasson Somech, *The Problem of Language in Modern Arabic Literature: Teaching Contemporary Arabic Series* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Education and Culture, Curriculum Center, Tel Aviv University, 1980).

Historically, the Arabic-speaking world has made significant contributions to global philosophy, science and literature and continues to do so today.[4] Its dominant faith, Islām, has played a central role in world history for centuries. Most foreign language students in the West, however, are unaware of the historical and global significance of Arabic or Islamic culture. Especially since 11 September 2001, these students are exposed on a daily basis to explanations and descriptions of Arabs and Muslims that are, at best, one-sided. Such outsider accounts of the cultural practices of Arabic speakers and Muslims generally do little to help foreign language students empathise with, or understand, members of the language community. This article will argue that active engagement with Arabic literature can help students gain a perspective on the Arabic-speaking community that is more in line with how Arabs perceive themselves. Conversely, reading literature can also help Western students comprehend the fears and concerns some Arabs feel towards Israel or the United States. Furthermore, this article will argue that reading Arabic prose and poetry can improve students' fluency and help them become more effective communicators.

Language proficiency and cultural competence

A mistaken view that continues to dominate foreign language teaching is the idea that a language is an "autonomous construct," independent from the people that speak it. It is the belief that language is simply a code and that "one language is essentially (albeit not easily) translatable into another."[5] This view holds that foreign language teaching should focus primarily on ensuring that students master the vocabulary

4. Toby E. Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China, and the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 48.
5. Claire Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1.

and the grammatical rules of the target language. Educators who adhere to this perspective are not necessarily opposed to teaching the culture of the people who speak the language but regard this merely as "yet another skill at the disposal of those who aspire to become conversant with the history and life of the target community."[6] This is however worse than an underestimation of the importance of teaching culture; it demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of what it means to be truly proficient in a language. This article will show that cultural awareness is an integral part of linguistic competence.

Language is not an "autonomous construct" but as a system determined by various socio-political processes.[7] The systems of classification, address and reference forms, specialised lexicons, and metaphors used in a language portray an often forgotten or hidden struggle over the symbolic power of a particular way of communicating.[8] Language is "a key to the cultural past of a society"[9] and "a guide to social reality."[10] Sapir argued that "language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives."[11]

Ever since the seventh century, the Holy Qur'ān has had a great influence on Arabic culture and language. We encounter

6. Dimitrios Thanasoulas, "The Importance of Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom," *Radical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2001), available at http://www.radicalpedagogy.org/Radical_Pedagogy/The_Importance_of_Teaching_Culture_in_the_Foreign_Language_Classroom.html (accessed 15 September 2011).
7. Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman 1989), vi; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990), 52.
8. Ibid., 31.
9. Zdenek Salzmann, *Language, Culture and Society: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology* (Boulder: Westview Press 1998), 41.
10. Edward Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (London: Rupert Hart- Davis, 1921), 209.
11. Ibid., 207.

culture-specific associations and meanings in the Holy Qurʾān that have shaped the perceptions and understandings of native Arabic speakers for over fourteen centuries. As a result of long-term cultural interaction, some of these associations are also shared by the peoples the Arabs came in contact with. A clear example of this is the emotional perception of colours. For example, English speakers and Arabic speakers have very similar emotional associations with the colours black and blue. The following verses from the Holy Qurʾān show clearly how these two colours are perceived:

> And those on the Day of Judgement, you shall see the faces of those who related falsehood to God, how they will assume **blackness** (*muswaddah*) expressive of the terror that falls upon them . . . .[12]

> The Day shall come when the trumpet is sounded and We throng the sinful who shall look **blue** (*zurq*), being affected with terror, distress and anxiety.[13]

Language and culture are so closely interwoven that their boundaries, if any, are extremely blurred.[14] Many people think of culture as what is often called "high culture"—art, literature, music, and so on.[15] However, contemporary social scientists define the concept more broadly. For example, Peck defines culture as "all the accepted and patterned ways of behaviour of a given people."[16] This includes visible external behavioural patterns and tangible or material manifestations such as town planning, advertisements and forms of "high

12. *Al-Zumar* (39): 60.
13. *Ṭā-Ha* (20): 102.
14. Thanasoulas, "The Importance of Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom."
15. Ibid.
16. Deborah Peck, *Teaching Culture: Beyond Language* (Yale: New Haven Teachers Institute, 1998), available at http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1984/3/84.03.06.x.html (accessed 15 September 2011).

culture." However, a significant part of culture is neither directly visible nor tangible. Sapir wrote that "culture may be defined as what a society does and thinks."[17] He argued that language plays a key role in structuring the thought patterns of its speakers, calling it the "how of thought."[18] He wrote that "language and our thought-grooves are inextricably interrelated, are, in a sense, one and the same."[19] This is in line with the famous French sociologist Durkheim who argued earlier that "language is not merely the external covering of a thought; it is also its internal framework. It does not confine itself to expressing this thought after it has once been formed; it also aids in making it."[20] A significant part of culture then, operates at the internal, often subconscious, level and is shaped by the very language people use. This includes values, ways of perceiving things and thought patterns.[21] As we will see, a people's "high culture" is a tangible manifestation of this invisible part of culture and therefore, constitutes a window for viewing the ways of thinking, seeing and valuing of that particular people.

Foreign language teachers should help students understand that culture predisposes people to a certain worldview and that language plays a key role in this: language maintains and sanctions a particular cognitive framework.[22] Specific socio-culturally structured associations vary from culture to culture and need to be learned and internalised.[23]

17. Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*, 218.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 217–218.
20. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 2008), 75.
21. David Killick and J. Poveda, "Perceptions of Cross-Cultural Capability: Is EFL Another Language?," in *Proceedings of the Conference at Leeds Metropolitan University 15–16* (Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University,1997), 221.
22. Joyce Merrill Valdes, ed., *Culture Bound: Bridging the Cultural Gap in Language Teaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 33.
23. Herbert Jay Landar, *Language and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 225.

To give an example, English speakers have learned to perceive a connection between red roses and romance. Clearly, this is a cultural perception, as there is no natural link between the two. Different language communities perceive different associations. Language can condition people to see and hear things in certain ways[24]. Foreign language learning, therefore, cannot be separated from foreign culture learning. It is essential that "knowledge of the grammatical system of a language be complemented by an understanding of culture-specific associations and meanings."[25] A cultural linguistic system comprises various Elementary Meaning Units (EMUs) which may differ from EMUs that operate in other systems.[26] One example of such an EMU would be that of the association between roses and romance that exists in the minds of English speakers, discussed above. Lado regards familiarity with a culture's EMUs "necessary for full communication with natives, to understand their reports on great achievements, and to read their classics."[27] Indeed, Politzer warned that "if we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning . . . ."[28]

There are direct pragmatic reasons for teaching culture as an integral part of foreign language teaching. In order to become functionally proficient in their new language,

24. Richard W. Howell and Harold J. Vetter, *Language in Behaviour* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1976).
25. Michael Byram, et al., *Teaching and Learning Language and Culture* (London: WBC, 1994), 4.
26. Robert Lado, *Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 28.
27. Ibid.
28. Robert Politzer, "Developing Cultural Understanding through Foreign Language Study," in *Report of the Fifth Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Teaching* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1959), 100–101.

students need to understand the role of context and the circumstances under which language can be used accurately and appropriately. Successful communication requires competent participation in the cultural linguistic community. For this reason, it is vital that students should, at the very least, learn what constitutes conventional behaviour in common situations. If students are to establish themselves as competent participants in their new language community, they need to consistently display the "correct" behaviour and perform the "correct" exchanges of language in any given social situation.[29] To this end, they need to become fully conversant with their new language community's cultural knowledge. Cultural linguistic knowledge is "the community's store of established knowledge."[30] It is "an all-encompassing kind of knowledge which, to a certain extent, determines, facilitates or precludes, all other types of knowledge" in that community.[31] It shapes "not only what the members of a cultural linguistic community should think or learn but also what they should ignore or treat as irrelevant."[32] It comprises procedural knowledge for "correctly" performing activities such as answering the phone, asking for a favour, cooking, weaving etc.[33] as well as strict "structures of expectation"[34] with which everyone belongs to a cultural-linguistic community is expected to comply without

29. Michael Lessard-Clouston, "Towards and Understanding of Culture in LS/FL Education," in *K.G. Studies in English: Ronko* (Hyogo: Kwansei Gakuin University Press, 1997) 25, and 131–150.
30. Roger Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 19.
31. Thanasoulas, "The Importance of Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom."
32. Eleanor Armour-Thomas, and Sharon-Ann Gopaul-McNicol, *Assessing Intelligence: Applying a Bio-Cultural Model* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 56.
33. Alessandro Duranti, *A Linguistic Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 28–29.
34. Deborah Tannen, "What's in a frame? Surface evidence for underlying expectations," in *New Directions in Discourse Processing*, ed. Roy O. Freedle (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1979), 144.

error. Samovar et al argue that "culture . . . is the foundation of communication"[35] for it dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds. It also shapes "how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted . . ."[36] Teaching a culture is, then, an equal complement to teaching a language. It is not an optional "extra" but a vital part of helping students become proficient in their new language.

Cultural competence, objectivity and respect

The teaching of culture in the foreign language class room is often limited to the transmission of factual cultural information. Students are, for example, presented with statistical information about the culture or given talks about the language community's institutions, customs, habits, and folklore.[37] For example, Spanish language students tend to be presented with talks or articles about the Spanish cuisine, Flamenco dancing, the Catholic Church and bull fighting. While this is valuable information, students would do well to acquaint themselves with, on its own it will do little to help students understand and empathise with the foreign culture's way of life, values, attitudes and beliefs. All that it offers is "mere book knowledge learned by rote."[38] However, communication requires understanding. If students are to understand members of the foreign language community, they need to be able

35. Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, and Nemi Jain, *Understanding Intercultural Communication* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1981), 24.
36. Thanasoulas, "The Importance of Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom."
37. Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, 24.
38. Theodore Huebener, *How to Teach Foreign Languages Effectively* (New York: New York University Press, 1959), 177.

to step into their shoes and experience the invisible part of that community's culture. Educators cannot teach this part of culture any more than they can teach anyone how to breathe.[39] It would be quite wrong to teach students to think about and perceive things in a specific way: such an approach "is corollary and ancillary to cultural and linguistic imperialism."[40] It is vital that educators do not teach the foreign culture from a culturally alienated or isolated perspective. Instead, they should enable students to immerse themselves in the foreign culture by turning the classroom into a cultural island.[41] Literature offers a great opportunity for such immersion for it constitutes a framework of authentic symbols, values and meanings. Under this approach, the foreign language teachers should act as cultural mediators, alerting students to aspects of the target culture that are of importance to the members of the target community themselves. They should help students make links between the target culture and their own[42] and make students aware of, and help them reflect upon any preconceived ideas they may be holding about the target culture.[43]

If done well, cultural-linguistic instruction will also have further empathy and respect towards the language community and promote objectivity and cultural understanding.[44] As shown above, communication is not just an exchange of information but a highly cognitive, effective and value-laden activity that shapes and is shaped by socio-political processes. For this reason, Melde argues that foreign language

39. Thanasoulas, "The Importance of Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom."
40. Ibid.
41. Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*; Meena Singhal, "Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom," Thai TESOL Bulletin 11, no. 1 (1998): 16–17; Peck, *Teaching Culture*.
42. Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, 205.
43. Singhal, "Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom."
44. Thanasoulas, "The Importance of Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom."

teaching should foster "critical awareness" of social realities.[45] Many foreign language students have little or no systematic knowledge about their own membership in a given society and culture and will therefore struggle to interpret the cultural phenomena they find in the language they are studying.[46] Students should be made aware of the fact that cultural factors, such as age, gender, or social class, shape cultural-linguistic interactions in all societies, including their own. Educators should help students understand that by the very act of talking, people assume social and cultural roles, which are so deeply entrenched in their thought processes as to go unnoticed."[47] When teaching culture in a foreign language classroom, it is important to start by raising students' awareness of their own culture and the ways in which this shapes how they themselves see, value and judge the world around them. Discussing the values, expectations, traditions, customs, and rituals they subconsciously take part in helps students reflect upon the values, expectations, and traditions of others "with a higher degree of intellectual objectivity."[48]

Learning a foreign culture can be subversive of the assumptions and premises that operate in a student's native culture.[49] Foreign language students may experience cognitive dissonance when they seek to integrate the values and meanings of the foreign culture with that of their own.[50] They may find, for example, that they suddenly understand two

45. Wilma Melde, *Zur Integration von Landeskunde und Kommunikation im Fremdsprachenunterricht* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1987).
46. Claire Kramsch, "The cultural discourse of foreign language textbooks," in *Toward a New Integration of Language and Culture*, ed. Allan J. Singerman (Middlebury, Vermont: Northeast Conference, 1988).
47. Thanasoulas, "The Importance of Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom."
48. Hans Straub, "Designing a Cross-Cultural Course," *English Forum* 37, no. 3 (1999): 5.
49. Ibid.
50. Byram, *Teaching and Learning Language and Culture.*

different "truths" that are in direct conflict with each other. As Kramsch points out, "from the clash between the native culture and the target culture, meanings that were taken for granted are suddenly questioned, challenged, problematised."[51] The result of this is that the student de-centres his or her worldview. This shift of perspective is conducive to intellectual objectivity and increased empathy and respect for the target language community. Educators should guide students in this process as cultural mediators and aim "to increase students" awareness and develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own."[52] Literature can be used to great effect in this context. If done well, teaching culture in the foreign language classroom helps students understand that there are no such things as superior and inferior cultures and that there are differences among people within the target culture too.[53]

Teaching Literature to Foreign Language Learners

This article holds that cultural linguistic immersion is the optimal way of achieving functional fluency in the target language. When it comes to learning a new language, there can be no substitute for actually living in a country where this language is spoken. However, foreign language teachers can provide the next best thing by turning their classrooms into small "cultural islands" where students can involve themselves deeply with the culture and the language they are studying.[54] Rather than passively listening to or reading about "cultural facts," students should be encouraged to actively engage with

51. Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, 238.
52. Roseanne Tavares and Ildney Cavalcanti, "Developing Cultural Awareness in EFL Classrooms," *English Forum* 34 (1996): 19.
53. Thanasoulas, "The Importance of Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom."
54. Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*; Singhal, "Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom"; and Peck, *Teaching Culture: Beyond Language*.

the language and the culture. The emphasis in class should be on "cultural experience" rather than "cultural awareness."[55] It is the author's experience during the 2008, 2009, and 2011 ARAB 3005/6507 Introduction Course to Arabic Literature to both undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Australian National University proved to be a great way of motivating students and drawing them into the language through literature. For example, the study of romantic poetry opened many discussions and comparison between the Western view of love affairs and the Arabian views, particularly the forbidden love of Romeo and Juliet and Quys and Layla. Contrary to the view of some critics[56] who argue that teaching literature limits students to taking a passive role, this article holds that teaching literature, in fact, stimulates students to engage proactively with the target language. As Duff and Maley point out, "literature offers universal themes which are relevant to students' own experience. It, unlike many teaching inputs, is also a mirror that reflects and heightens each learner's perception of the social world. Thus, literary texts are open to multiple interpretation and genuine interaction."[57] Students cannot remain passive if they are to interpret and understand what they are reading. They are placed "in an active interactional role in working with and making sense of the target language."[58] Guided by the teacher, students must actively participate in "content-based purposeful learner talk" in order to discern meaning.[59]

55. Byram, *Teaching and Learning Language and Culture*, 55-60.
56. As an example, Hans Jalling, *Modern Language Teaching* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).
57. Alan Duff and Alan Maley, *Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 6.
58. Christopher J. Brumfit and Ronald A. Carter, *Literature and Language Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 15.
59. Ronald A. Carter and Michael N. Long, *Teaching Literature* (London: Longman, 1991).

Critics may ask why students should specifically be taught literature. It is true that, as Alvstad points out, "all texts (including those to be found in newspapers, magazines, history books, songs, advertisements, etc) can help develop linguistic competence and can serve as points of entry into foreign culture."[60] The reason is that literature, unlike newspaper articles, has multiple layers of meaning, and therefore, furthers group analysis and debate. Teaching literature "stimulates the imagination of students and develops their critical abilities."[61] Students may become so involved in interpreting the different symbols and meanings found in the text that they become eager to master the language in which it was written too. They "become more productive and adventurous when they begin to perceive the richness and diversity of the language they are trying to learn and begin to make use of some of the potential themselves."[62] This is why meaningful or amusing literary texts are "more likely to have a long-term and valuable effect upon the learners' linguistic and extra linguistic knowledge."[63]

Exposure to literary works helps students expand their language awareness and develop their language competence. It provides them with specific examples of how language is used. Reading literature helps students familiarise themselves with many features of the written language such as the formation and function of sentences, the varieties of possible structures or the different ways of connecting ideas.[64] It also

60. Cecilia Alvstad and Andrea Castro, "Conceptions of Literature in University Language Courses," *Modern Language Journal* 93, no. 2 (2009): 170–184.
61. Gillian Lazar, *Literature and Language Teaching: A Guide for Teachers and Trainers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 19.
62. Murat Hişmanoğlu, "Teaching English through Literature," *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2005): 53–6.
63. Ibid.
64. Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater, *Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 5.

allows students to acquaint themselves with the lexical and grammatical categories of the target language that shape how its speakers conceptualise the world around them. It shows them elements of culture-specific systems of meaning, value and association in context. A clear example of this is the use of metaphors in poetry or prose. Metaphors "have been analysed as providing conceptual schemata through which we understand the world."[65] The Arabic sayings below are good examples of culture-specific associations and symbolic meanings:

> "*Bi al-ṣayf ḍayyaʿti al-laban*," meaning literally "you lost the buttermilk in summer." This is said to someone who has lost a great opportunity as a result of his or her own doings.
>
> "*Karam Ḥātim al-Ṭāʾī*," which means "the generosity of Ḥātim al-Ṭāʾī." This saying refers to the tribe of Ṭāʾī; one of the old Arabian tribes famous for its generosity to guests and visitors.
>
> "*Idhā saqaṭa al-samāʾ bi arḍ qawm . . . raʿaynāhu wa in kānū ghiḍāban*," which can be literally rendered as "if the sky falls onto people's land, even if they are angry, it will be shepherded." This means that if rain falls onto any land, even infertile land, it will turn it green.

Literature can play a vital role in helping foreign language students "become familiar with many different linguistic forms, communicative functions, and meanings."[66] There are however a number of pitfalls foreign language teachers should be aware of. Many students believe literature to be difficult and uninteresting.[67] As a consequence, they are

65. Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology*, 64.
66. Hişmanoğlu, "Teaching English through Literature," 54.
67. Neelakshi C. Premawardhena, "Integrating Literature into Foreign Language Teaching: A Sri Lankan Perspective," *Novitas-ROYAL* 1, no. 2 (2007): 92–97.

negatively disposed towards it from the outset. Furthermore, if students are asked to engage with literary texts that are beyond their level of linguistic competence, there is a risk that they will lose confidence in their linguistic ability and become demotivated.[68] This, however, very much depends on the group of students. The author found that her students were motivated to learn few verses of "the suspended odes" or "the hanging poems" known in Arabic as the "*Muʿallaqāt*" by heart. These were seven long poems from the pre-Islamic era, and even though they were written in language that was far beyond their linguistic abilities, students were able to read, analyse and discuss the stories and themes of three of them. The seven poems, each by a different author, were hung on the wall of the *Kaʿba* (the house of God) at Mecca. It was a tradition by Arabian tribes to showcase their poets and poems at large gatherings in a market called *ʿUkāẓ*. The best of these poems were then hung on the wall of the *Kaʿba*. The author's students were keen to understand the symbols and meanings in the text and they challenged themselves to rise to the level of complexity of the language. For this reason it is vital that, "when selecting the literary texts to be used in language classes, the language teacher should take into account the needs, motivation, interests, cultural background and language level of the students."[69] Studies of teaching Arabic as a foreign language found that the main reasons why students failed to comprehend literary texts were poor preparation by educators, inappropriate teaching strategies and overly ambitious curricula.[70] Experienced language teachers know that no two groups of students are the same and choose texts that are appropriate to the group's linguistic ability and specific interests.

68. Ibid.
69. Hişmanoğlu, "Teaching English through Literature," 57.
70. Habib-Allah (1985) cited in Salim Abu-Rabia, "Effects of exposure to literary Arabic on reading comprehension in a diglossic situation," *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 13 (2000): 147–157.

Provided the selected texts are appropriate, exposure to literary works can help foreign language students expand their language awareness and develop their language competence. One of the major functions of teaching literature in the foreign language classroom, however, "is to serve as a medium to transmit the culture of the people who speak the language in which it is written."[71] Foreign accounts of a culture generally provide an outsider perspective that may be at odds with the self perception of the members of a cultural community. Language textbooks are specifically written for foreign language students and, therefore, also present students with a limited and external perspective on the target culture. Literature, on the other hand, is generally written by and targeted at native speakers of the language and is, for this reason, widely regarded as being a source of "genuine" and "authentic" information about the target culture learners can avail themselves of.[72]

Unlike purely informative texts, such as newspaper articles, literary texts give students access to "a world of attitudes, and values, collective imaginings and historical frames of reference that constitute the memory of a people or speech community."[73] They present students with colourfully created fictional worlds that reflect the cultural codes and preoccupations of the language community from which they spring. By actively engaging with these texts, readers come to understand how the characters in such literary works experience the world and how they speak and behave in different settings. As Gray points out, "students learn to see a world through another's eyes, observing human values and a different kind of living, and discovering that others live in very different societies. They will understand and become

71. Valdes, *Culture Bound*, 137.
72. Collie and Slater, *Literature in the Language Classroom*.
73. Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, 175.

broadly aware of the social, political, historical, cultural events happening in a certain society."[74] Arabic's rich literary corpus, spanning from the pre-Islamic era to the present day, provides students with the opportunity to gain direct unmediated access to historic and contemporary cultural artefacts. The author's experience during the 2008, 2009, and 2011 ARAB 3005/6507 teaching an "Introduction Course to Arabic Literature" to both undergraduate and postgraduate at the Australian National University, that teaching this type of literature greatly boosts students' level of engagement and motivation. The Arabic poetry verses below are good examples of culture-specific genuine and authentic information from *The Madman* (*majnūn*) and *Layla*:

> Oh, Old man who rejected my proposal I hope that you have lived hard life (*alā ayyuhā al-shaykh alladhī mā binā yarḍā shaqayta wa lā hunnīta min ʿishika al-ghaḍḍā*).
>
> Like the One you have imposed on me and left me wondering to perish without enjoying my sleep (*shaqayta kamā ashqaytanī wa taraktanī ahimu maʿa al-hullāki lā aṭʿamu al-ghamḍā*).
>
> It is like my heart captured by a flying bird's claws whenever I mention Leila's name, it digs deeper in my heart (*ka anna fu'ādī fī makhālībi ṭā'irin idhā dhukirat Laylā yashuddu bihi qabḍā*).
>
> Life on earth is like a ring put on me which does not extend in length and width (*ka anna fijāja al-arḍi ḥalaqatu khātimin ʿalayya fa mā tazdād ṭūlan wa lā ʿarḍan*).

74. Ronald Gray, "Using Translated First Language Literature in the Second Language Classroom," *The Internet TESL Journal* 11, no. 1 (2005): 1-3, available at http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Gray-TranslatedL1Literatue.html (accessed 15 September 2011).

Literature can help students quickly develop a feel for the cultural norms and expectations of the target culture.[75] However, as discussed, if students are to understand and empathise with the cultural logic of the target community, it is necessary that they first become aware of the fact that their own beliefs, values and perceptions are shaped by their own native culture. Only when they appreciate the limitations of their own cultural identity, that is, only when they understand that their way of perceiving the world is not universal, can they meaningfully start to interpret and account for the values, assumptions, and beliefs that permeate the literary texts of the target culture.[76]

Arabic literature reflects the values, beliefs, perceptions and preoccupations of the era and geographical region in which it was written. The arrival of Islām had a significant impact on the customs and traditions of Arabs, although some elements of this culture remained unaffected. For example, whereas views on premarital relations changed, the symbolic significance of horses stayed constant. Teaching literature is a great springboard for cultural comparison and raising students' awareness of both the target culture and their own. It is also a great tool for analysing the ways in which language and social variables, such as sex, age, social class or location, interpenetrate. Straub suggests, for example, that students be encouraged to speculate on the social status, group membership or approachability of literary characters by examining the symbolic meanings of the words used to describe them. He recommends that students contemplate "the significance of various styles of clothing, the symbolic meanings of colours, gestures, facial expressions and other nonverbal cues" mentioned in literary texts and reflect on whether they concur or are at variance with, those in their

75. Hişmanoğlu, "Teaching English through Literature."
76. Killick and Poveda, "Perceptions of Cross-Cultural Capability."

own culture.[77] Guided by the author, students examined the influence of environment on the style of poetry and prose with great enthusiasm, comparing the works from Arabic authors from different regions such as Syria, Persia and Andalusia. Active engagement with literary texts raises students' awareness of their own cultural assumptions and helps them appreciate the significance of a particular term or word in the target language and culture. As Carter and Long point out, "teaching literature enables students to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from their own in time and space, and to come to perceive traditions of thought, feeling and artistic form within the heritage the literature of such cultures endows."[78] If done well, teaching literature in the foreign language classroom enables students to obtain "a higher degree of intellectual objectivity"[79] when interpreting and seeking to understand the target culture. It is a great way to "combat cultural distance"[80] and increase empathy with and respect for the language community.

Conclusion

This article has shown that teaching literature to foreign language students can help bridge the cultural gap between the students and the target language community. It has demonstrated that language and culture are so closely linked that it is impossible to achieve full fluency in one but not the other. It has argued that in order for students to be able to communicate effectively in their new language, they need to gain an empathetic understanding of the target culture and

77. Straub, "Designing a Cross-Cultural Course," 6.
78. Carter and Long, *Teaching Literature*, 2.
79. Straub, "Designing a Cross-Cultural Course," 5.
80. Janet K. Swaffar, "Written Texts and Cultural Readings," in *Text and Context: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Language Study*, ed. Claire Kramsch and Sally McConnell-Ginet (Lexington, MA: DC Heath, 1992).

learn to act in accordance with its norms and expectations. This can best be achieved, it contends, through complete cultural immersion. The article has highlighted that literature offers students a cost effective method of doing so. Unlike textbooks or other outsider accounts, literature is written by and targeted at native speakers of a language. It offers, therefore, an authentic and genuine window upon the culture of the target language. It shows students specific cultural symbols, values and meanings in context and provides them with direct and unmediated access to the thought patterns, judgements and preoccupations of a people at a particular time and place. Furthermore, it shows how language and social variables interact and also provides students with examples of social roles and expected behaviour in various circumstances. Literature has multiple layers of meaning and therefore, lends itself perfectly for critical reflection and debate. Unlike purely informative texts, literature stimulates the imagination and critical abilities of students. It is the author's experience that learning literature greatly motivates students and gives them a heightened sense of achievement.

The article has argued that the methodology adopted when teaching literature as part of a foreign language course is of the utmost importance. Texts need to be carefully selected to meet the needs, motivation, interests, cultural background and language level of the students. This does not necessarily mean that students cannot be presented with texts that are above their level of linguistic competence. The author has found that the richness of meaning encountered in classic Arabic texts motivated students to rise to the level of the complexity of the language. A well chosen literary text, then, can strongly motivate students to engage proactively with the language.

When teaching literature, educators should help students develop the intellectual objectivity required to make sense of the cultural phenomena encountered in the text. They should

aim to raise students' awareness and understanding of what it means to be part of a culture. It is vital that students come to understand that they themselves are products of a particular culture and that their background shapes the ways in which they make sense of the world. This is an important job for all foreign language teachers, but perhaps even more so for teachers of Arabic as a foreign language. By allowing students to directly experience Arabic culture as it is written in literary texts, teachers of Arabic can go a long way to counter the generally negative and often hostile accounts of this culture given by Western commentators. Educators should take a proactive role as cultural mediators and highlight aspects of the literary text that are important from an Arabic and Islamic perspective and help students make connections between their own culture and the one they encounter in the text. Foreign language teachers cannot do better than let the richness and beauty of a culture speak for itself through works of prose and poetry.