

Exploring the Challenges Facing Arabic-Speaking ESL Students & Teachers in Middle School

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to uncover challenges facing Arabic-speaking ESL students as well as teachers in the middle school classroom. Two Arabic-speaking ESL students and eight teachers in a public middle school located in Washington State participated in this exploratory study. Research questions focused on the needs of the Arabic-speaking ESL students, the factors that influence their learning, and the problems the teachers face in supporting these students. Data sources included teacher and student interviews, classroom observations, and a parent survey. Data showed that the students face challenges to learn the English language, the culture, and curricular content using their limited English. The study concluded that several important challenges for teachers and students exist, including time, language support, and knowledge.

Key words: linguistic barriers, social factors, cultural awareness, teacher education

1. INTRODUCTION

The population of ESL students in U.S. schools needs urgent attention because it continues to grow and is expected to exceed 10 million by 2015 (NEA, 2008). Furthermore, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2011), the number of eighth grade English language learners below the basic level in reading achievement is very high (71%) compared to their native counterparts (22%). The same report stated that only 3% of English language learners are at or above the proficient level in reading, compared to 35% of their native counterparts who are at or above this level. This achievement gap for English language learners in U.S. public schools has been almost the same since 1998.

This could mean that teachers are not considering the needs of their students or that there are other challenges students face that are not being effectively addressed. These challenges can be different from one group to another due to cultural and linguistic differences (Al-Khresheh, 2010; Abdo & Breen, 2010; Ahmad, 2011; Aubrey, 2009; Barros, 2003; Burt & Peyton, 2003; Miller & Endo, 2004; Palmer, El-Ashry, Leclere & Chang, 2007). According to Batalove & McHugh (2010), Arabic was among the top five native languages spoken in 29 states in the 2009-10 school year. Since few research studies have been done on the difficulties that face Arabic-speaking ESL students in U.S. public schools, there is a real need to understand the challenges they face in the classroom. The purpose of this exploratory study is to uncover the challenges facing Arabic-speaking ESL students as well as teachers in the middle school

classroom and discover how the students' needs are being met. To do so, this paper first presents what the literature says about Arabic-speaking ESL students as well as teachers, then it discusses the study method and data collection, and finally presents the results according to the research questions. This is followed by conclusions and implications for future research and instruction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Arabic-speaking ESL students may struggle like other ESL students in U.S public schools. Their struggling can be related to many factors, including cultural and linguistic factors. Teachers' lack of awareness of these factors can also affect Arab students' achievement (Aubrey, 2009; Burt & Peyton, 2003; Miller & Endo, 2004; Palmer et al., 2007). Therefore, it is very important to examine the factors that face this particular group to help them overcome any problems they may encounter in the learning process.

2.1 Positive and Negative Transfer

Palmer et al. (2007) examined the factors that affected a nine-year-old Palestinian ESL student, Abdallah, in acquiring English as a second language. As is the case for many ESL students in U.S. schools, Abdallah was pulled out with other English language learners for two hours each day to receive support in language skills from the ESL teacher. His ESL teacher reported that Abdallah faced difficulties in decoding English words with three or four phonemes and had poor spelling and writing. Abdallah was assessed in both of his languages, which led the researchers to suggest that his Arabic reading skills were not sufficient enough to support him making transfers to his second language, or L2. They also found that Arabic and English share some positive and negative transfers that may ease or hinder the language acquisition of the learner. For example, the alphabetic systems and verb tenses are similar in both languages i.e., positive transfer. However, the researchers noted that many differences can be found between the two languages that lead to negative transfers; for example, English is written from left to right, whereas Arabic is written from right to left. In another study that focused on Jordanian EFL students, Al-Khresheh (2010) examined the interference of Arabic syntactic structures on English syntactic structures. The participants were 115 10th grade EFL students, and the study took place in a Jordanian school. The EFL students were given a multiple choice test to determine their errors in simple sentence word order. The findings indicated that Arabic-speaking EFL students have difficulty in the word order used in simple English sentence structure. The study also indicated that Arab students were affected by their use of standard and non-standard Arabic in the transfer process.

Abdo & Breen (2010) also examined the challenges that face English language learners, mainly focusing on the negative transfers that challenged the students. The study included five EFL teachers and six students and took place in one elementary and one secondary school for a three-week period. Similar to the previous study, the researchers found that negative and positive transfers affect the language acquisition of the students. In their study's conclusions, similar to the previous finding, challenges included that Arabic is written opposite of English, from right to left, and that English graphophonemic rules are irregular, whereas these rules in Arabic are not. In order to overcome these challenges, the students may need to practice the second language more frequently; Spolsky (1989) stated that the outcome of the language learning depends in part

on the opportunities that learners receive in their language learning. In addition, Egbert et al. (2007) suggested giving students extra time and sufficient feedback to help them develop their language efficiently and effectively.

2.2 Language Match

To identify the problems that Arab students face in learning English pronunciation, Barros (2003) examined these problems among a group of Arab students from different Arab countries. There were six participants (five males and one female) involved in the study, and they had each been in the U.S. for at least four years. The results indicated that Arab speakers face difficulties in certain English consonant sounds, such as /p/, /d/, /v/, /tʃ/, /ʒ/, and /ŋ/. In a similar investigation that occurred in a different environment, Ahmad (2011) examined Saudi EFL students in regard to the difficulties that face Saudi students in English pronunciation. The participants were eight students selected randomly from different regions of Saudi Arabia. The participants had never been to any English-speaking countries. The results agreed with those of Barros (2003) that the participants faced difficulty with certain English consonant sounds. Furthermore, Perfetti & Dunlap (2008) pointed out that the match between L1 and L2 is another factor the students may face in second language acquisition. They stated that Arab students may have difficulty with vowels because they rely on context to determine vowels, which is not the case in English. In Arabic sentences, only consonants are written down, and the reader is required to fill in the vowels based on the context. To overcome this challenge, Burt and Peyton (2003) said that ESL students need to be taught the English symbol system and English sound-symbol correspondences because of the different L1 system. For example, Arabic-speaking ESL students may face difficulties with vowels in English because they are not written in Arabic. However, this might be less of a problem if the students have enough time and feedback from instructors and peers (Egbert et al., 2007) because more time and feedback are necessary for students who need extra help and support.

2.3 Home Language Use

In the conclusion of their study described above, Palmer et al. (2007) concluded that Arabic should be used at home and school to assist ESL students with their home language skills. They also encouraged further research to look at how the nature of the student's first language affects his or her second language acquisition and what other factors may affect Arab ESL students' performance in the language classroom. In their study discussed earlier, Abdo & Breen (2010) disagreed with Palmer et al. (2007) about using the student's home language to offer support and help. They believed that using the home language in the classroom to explain word meanings is ineffective. They justified their argument by stating that the students need to use English to gain more access to the language. This disagreement, however, can be related to the difference between the two settings: the argument that supports using the home language occurs in U.S. classrooms, whereas the other occurs in an Arab country where Arabic is probably used most of the time. Meanwhile, Khassawneh (2011) conducted a study that looked at attitudes of Jordanian students towards the use of Arabic in the English classroom. The study included 206 male and female students who were selected based on their class's methods of learning English. The participants were in a class where either Arabic was not allowed, Arabic was used to a large extent, or Arabic was used to some extent. The study found that students with low-level English proficiency were more positive towards the use of the L1 in the English classroom than those

with high English proficiency levels. Therefore, it is important to give second language learners some texts in their first language to help them in their second language.

2.4 Authentic Texts

Many researchers regard the lack of authentic texts as a problem that faces Arabic-speaking ESL students. For example, based on their case study of an Arabic-speaking ESL student in a U.S. school, Palmer et al. (2007) said that Arabic-speaking ESL students in U.S public schools need to have texts that are culturally and linguistically related to them. Moreover, they argued that the lack of bilingual texts for Arabic-speaking ESL students prevented the researchers from finding related materials for Abdallah, the participant in their study. They pointed out that such Arabic-English texts can be very useful in the classroom because teachers can use them to engage their students with texts that are culturally and linguistically relevant. Moreover, Melvin & Stout (1987) said that “Authentic texts give students direct access to the culture and help them use the new language authentically themselves, to communicate meaning in meaningful situations rather than for demonstrating knowledge of a grammar point or a lexical item” (p. 44). According to Gilmore (2007), authenticity can be referred to in different situations, such as the text, the participants, and the social or cultural situation. Therefore, using authentic texts can support English language learners by allowing them to bring their home culture into the classroom. Moreover, in her valuable book that shed lights on different research studies and her own experience with diverse students, Dong (2004) pointed out that bringing the home culture of the ESL students to school is very important and necessary to ensure effective language learning. In addition, authentic texts can also provide learners with “a much richer source of input in the classroom and have the potential to raise learners’ awareness of a wider range of discourse features” (Gilmore, 2011, p. 791). Furthermore, in his study of teacher change in beliefs about the use of linguistic and cultural experiences of ESL students in the science class, Lee (2004) concluded that when teachers integrate science with students’ linguistic and cultural background knowledge, science can be more accessible and meaningful for students. Most importantly, if the students are involved in authentic tasks, their language learning can be developed effectively and efficiently (Egbert et al., 2007).

2.5 Teacher and Student Cultural Awareness

The literature indicates that in order to support authenticity in classroom tasks and avoid disengaging Arabic-speaking ESL students from classroom activities, teachers need to know something about Arab culture. Aburumuh, Smith & Ratcliffe (2009) conducted a study to examine educators’ knowledge and perceptions of Arabic and Islamic cultures. The study collected surveys from 131 elementary and middle school teachers and 87 teaching faculty in the U.S. Southwest. The participants were asked to match the terms *Arab*, *Arabic*, *Islam*, and *Muslim* with their definitions, and they were also asked to answer true/false questions about Arabs and some Islamic holidays. The study found that most participants lack basic knowledge about Arab and Islamic culture, including knowledge of Muslim holidays, such as Eid al Fitr. Moreover, most participants mistakenly considered Ramadan to be a Muslim holiday, when in fact, it is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar when Muslims are required to fast during the whole month from dawn to sunset. This knowledge can be useful for teachers so they can provide safe environments for students during Ramadan and other important days. For example, teachers may avoid scheduling tests during Islamic holidays and enable students to go to the library at

lunchtime during Ramadan (Aburumuh, Smith & Ratcliffe, 2009; Ariza, 2006; Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 2002).

In addition, Brisk (2010) pointed out that culture has an impact on Arabic-speaking ESL students' interactions in the classroom. She gave an example of Sudanese Muslim girls who disengaged from interacting with boys in their groups. This disengagement occurred as a result of their own culture that needs to be understood by teachers in order to help students fully engage in classroom activities. However, giving such opportunities for Arabic-speaking ESL students is not enough without sufficient knowledge of the students' cultural and background knowledge. To demonstrate cultural awareness and support authenticity, Wingfield & Karaman (2001) suggested some actions, such as introducing Arabic language and literature in the classroom to encourage Arab students to participate and interact in the learning process. Moreover, Santos & Suleiman (1993) believed that teachers can support Arabic-speaking ESL students by adjusting their curriculum to include the students' culture and considering their lifestyle. For example, teachers can include the role of Arab scholars during medieval Islamic civilization in different fields, such as medicine (Ibn al-Nafis, Ibn-Sina, Al-Razi, and Ibn al-Haytham), geography (Al-Idrisi, Ibn-Batuta, and Ibn-Khaldun), mathematics (Al-Khwārizmī), chemistry (Ibn Hayyān), and other disciplines (Santos & Suleiman, 1993). By including such ideas, Arabic-speaking ESL students can be engaged and involved in the class content. Most importantly, Egbert et al. (2007) suggested that learners should be involved in authentic tasks to ensure efficient and effective language learning.

2.6 Stereotypes

In addition to other cultural barriers, stereotyping of Arabs is another barrier that can hinder the learning process of Arab students in U.S. schools. In a study including 500 high school students that focused on the students' perceptions of Arabs and Middle Easterners, Kamalipour (2000) found out that the participants see the Middle East as: war, terrorism, dangerous, oil, desert, hot, camels, sand, hate, fanatics, radical, oppression, dark skin, dress funny, black veils, cab drivers, oppressed women, always in news. They also see Arabs as: terrorists, Muslims, turbans, veils, hijackers, dark skins, tents, sand, robes, harems, religious, repression, anti-American, Ali Baba, Aladdin, rebels, sandals, Mecca. Moreover, they see Muslims as: strict religion, mosques, Muhammad, long robes, veiled women, always praying, Mecca, holy war, Arabs, violence, terrorism, no women's rights, Allah, Quran, dark skin, harems, sacrifice, militant, war, Middle East, anti-American, strong beliefs. Furthermore, Arab children in U.S. schools are suffering from negative stereotypes about their culture and values that do not represent their actual Arab heritage; this includes, but is not limited to, considering Arabs and Muslims as terrorists (Al-Hazza & Lucking, 2005; Wingfield, 2006; Wingfield & Karaman, 2001). To avoid misunderstandings, Rivers (1987) stated that the students need to establish cross-cultural interaction through activities. In addition, Egbert et al. (2007) considered having the students attend mindfully to the learning process as an important condition for efficient and effective language learning.

Brisk (1998) argued that it is very useful to understand the factors that affect students negatively in order to help them build on the positive factors instead. Moreover, teachers should be aware of the fact that although the majority of Arabs are Muslims, there are also a small number of non-

Muslims (such as Christians and Jews) who speak Arabic and live in an Arab country (Aburumuh, Smith & Ratcliffe, 2009; Al-Hazza & Lucking, 2005; Wingfield, 2006). In addition, there are other minority groups who live in Arab countries who are not Arabs (Aburumuh, Smith & Ratcliffe, 2009). Santos & Suleiman (1993) gave some examples of these groups, such as Kurds, Copts, Armenians, and Berbers. Knowing these differences can help teachers have better communication with both students and their families. However, ignoring these groups in the classroom may affect their participation in classroom activities, and hence their academic performance can be affected (Brisk, 2010). According to Carrasquillo & Rodríguez (2002), a presentation at the beginning of the school year can be an important strategy in giving sufficient information about Arab and Muslim students to the whole school community. In addition, such awareness can be useful to teachers when it comes to involving Arabic-speaking ESL students in authentic tasks (Egbert et al., 2007).

Based on the literature above, it is clear that a variety of challenges face Arab students as well as teachers. Solutions to these challenges should be explored to support Arabic-speaking ESL students in acquiring the language, culture, and content efficiently and effectively. These challenges can be summarized as linguistic and cultural differences, lack of understanding of the curriculum and pedagogy, lack of motivation, religious and lifestyle differences, lack of cultural awareness, and negative stereotypes. To understand these challenges and their effect on students' learning, a framework proposed by Egbert et al. (2007) can be employed; this framework asserts that effective and efficient language learning can occur if the learning environment meets certain conditions. The current study focuses on three important conditions:

1. Learners are involved in authentic tasks.
2. Learners have enough time and feedback.
3. Learners are guided to attend mindfully to the learning process.

If ESL students are affected by any of the potential language learning barriers, a change in the learning environment to meet the conditions might help. For example, if ESL students' cultures are ignored in the classroom, they may disengage. To avoid such a barrier, teachers might try to understand students' backgrounds and provide them with appropriate and related materials that enable them to be involved in authentic tasks. However, not much is known about the true problems and challenges that face Arabic-speaking ESL students in U.S. public schools because there are only a few studies that address this particular group. In addition, little has been written about the learning conditions that these Arabic-speaking students find themselves in. To find out more, this study explores Arabic-speaking ESL students in ESL and mainstream classrooms to uncover what may affect their learning both positively and negatively. Three learning conditions provided by Egbert et al. (2007) provided the framework for this study because classrooms that meet these research-based conditions may reduce the challenges for Arabic-speaking ESL students.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the literature review, this study used a qualitative exploratory methodology to investigate the following questions:

1. Do Arabic-speaking ESL students actually face challenges in school?

2. What do teachers perceive to be the needs of their Arabic-speaking ESL students?
3. What do participants perceive to be the factors that influence the learning of Arabic-speaking ESL students in the classroom?
4. What do teachers perceive to be the problems faced in supporting these ESL students in the classroom?

4. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to help understand the challenges that might affect the classroom learning of Arab students. This section describes the setting, data collection procedures, and data analysis process of the study.

4.1 Description of Setting & Participants

The study took place in a public middle school located in Washington State. Although the majority of the student population is composed of white, middle-class, native English speakers, some students come from different cultures and educational backgrounds, and they speak different languages, including Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, and Chinese. This study focused on two ESL Arabic-speaking students, one each at the 6th and 8th grade levels. Of three native Arabic-speaking students in the school, two students agreed to participate. This small number allowed for rich data collection and a deep investigation of the research questions. To protect the ESL students' identities, the names "Ahmed" and "Ali" were used throughout the discussion instead of their actual names. The students were at the intermediate level of English proficiency based on their English test at school. Being at this level, the participants were a good source to discuss the challenges they faced; they were still considered ESL students, but they had sufficient proficiency in English to participate. Speaking the primary language of the participants was very helpful to me in that I was able to establish a good relationship with the students during data collection and could work with them in their L1 when necessary.

To determine their English level, the participating students were tested upon admittance to the school. Based on the test results, the students were assigned to a specific group level (beginner, intermediate, upper intermediate, or advanced). However, their grade level is not related to their ESL level. The students are assigned to their grade level according to their educational background and age. Therefore, it is common to see students in the intermediate level of English even though their grade level is different, like the students in this study (6th & 8th graders in the intermediate level of ESL). The students are pulled out of their regular classes for 45 minutes every day to take a class taught by the ESL teacher. The school has only one teacher who is certified to teach English as a second language. The ESL students take the rest of their classes with native English-speaking students in their grade. They are labeled as English language learners until they pass the state English proficiency test.

Four teachers participated in the study interviews and classroom observations; these included the History/English teacher, the English/Social Studies teacher, the Earth Science teacher, and the ESL teacher. Four other teachers, from the Algebra, Math, Science/Health, and Healthy Living classes, were only observed because they were either busy or not willing to be interviewed.

4.2 Data Collection and Procedures

This study lasted seven weeks and took place during school hours. To ensure trustworthiness, data were collected using several different sources. The use of different data collection sources enabled the researcher to get a clearer picture of the topic under investigation (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). The following is a detailed description of each data source that was used in this study.

4.2.1 Observation Field Notes

Observations included all activities that the ESL students were involved in during the school day. Observations were recorded according to a checklist for each classroom observation that looked at the three learning conditions (Egbert et al., 2007) and the barriers that these conditions may exacerbate or help overcome. The students were also observed in different settings, such as in the classroom, at lunch, and in the computer room to find out more detail about their daily use of language during school time. A total of 10 different classes were observed at least twice each. During these observations, in addition to the checklist, I took field notes and noted my own reflections on the students' apparent engagement, activities, reactions, and participation. At the end of each site observation, I organized the notes I had taken into a detailed description.

4.2.2 Parent Survey

Parents of both students were given survey questions to answer. Using these surveys, data were collected about parents' support of their children, how the children practiced languages at home, parental involvement in the learning process of their children, their daily activities at home, the children's first language problems, any other challenges that might affect the children's language acquisition, and parents' background knowledge.

4.2.3 Teacher and Student Interviews

I chose four of the participants' teachers to interview because they were teaching one of the main subjects (English, ESL, Science, or Social Studies), and they were also very eager to participate and willing to answer any questions I had. All interviews were semi-structured based on the research questions and class observations. The main focus of the interviews was to collect information about the teachers' experiences in supporting ESL students, their beliefs about their methods of teaching ESL students, the challenges they face, the problems that the students face in acquiring the language, and any factors that might affect the students' language learning. The teachers were interviewed individually at the end of the study.

The ESL students were also interviewed individually at school once during the study. Semi-structured interviews were used to ask questions based on class observations and other related issues that I came across during the study. These interviews helped me to determine any challenges students perceived as well as the support they received while they learned both language and content. All interviews were videotaped and audio recorded to decrease the chance of data loss. All interviews were then transcribed, double checked by a native speaker teacher for consistency, typed, and coded for analysis.

4.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing process that included reflection, organization, and coding in order to make an appropriate interpretation and have greater understanding of the data (Creswell, 2009). A general inductive approach was adopted in the data analysis process. According to Thomas (2006), this data analysis approach can “condense extensive and varied raw text data into a brief summary format,” and it can also establish clear links between the research purpose and its findings based on the raw data (p. 238). Following is a description of the steps taken in the data analysis process: first, the data were organized by transcribing the interviews and writing up field notes with more details. Second, the data were prepared for analysis by reading through to make general sense of what had been collected. Third, the data were coded and questioned in order to highlight the important points related to the main questions of the study. To ensure trustworthiness, these codes were checked by another researcher and recoded when necessary. Fourth, themes were identified through the data coding process. As the themes emerged, I reorganized them and combined them in relevant ways, and then this action was repeated and reviewed several times. Then, six themes were selected as the major themes. I also used a qualitative data analysis computer program (Weft QDA) to manage the themes. Then, I made connections between these themes to make them more organized and to draw a larger picture of these themes. These included different perspectives from participants with some quotations to prepare the discussion. To make connections between the themes and the objective of this study, these major themes were linked to the research questions and the framework of this study through the raw data. These data helped me get a clear understanding of the needs of the Arabic-speaking ESL students, the factors that influence their learning, and the problems the teachers face in supporting these students.

4.4 Limitations

Although this study has limitations that cannot be controlled, its validity is not affected by these limitations. For example, to collect deep and concrete data from participants, I limited the number of participants to only a few, making the study less generalizable. The small number of participants enabled me to collect concrete data that may be difficult to obtain otherwise. Another limitation was that the students were interviewed only once due to their busy class schedules. In addition to this interview, however, this study followed the students in different classrooms and other school activities, which helped the researcher to gather some important data. I also had a chance to sit and talk informally with the students during lunch time. One more limitation was that my interpretation and my views during the data collection might be affected by my background knowledge as a member of Arab society. Feedback from a colleague helped me to reduce this limitation by looking back to the data several times and making a clear connection between my own interpretation and the data.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion are arranged below based on each research question in order to make it easier to understand the results.

5.1 Do Arabic-Speaking ESL Students Actually Face Challenges in School?

The literature says that many ESL students are struggling in school, and the results of this study show that the student participants were indeed facing challenges. For example, in one

conversation I had with Ahmed to ask him about not working on his task during class, he said that he left his sheet at home because he faced some linguistic difficulties in doing the task (writing a short summary about some astronomers). Instead, Ahmed preferred to do the task at home so he could receive language support from his parents. Moreover, later in my interview with his teacher when I asked about Ahmed's lack of participation in the classroom activity, she said that "is him" and "He will try to get out of the work a lot." She then confirmed that he faced some language difficulties at the beginning of the year; he had told her that when he was not participating in the classroom tasks, it was because he did not understand. At that time, she told him that she could help him individually at the end of the class. Although the teacher gave him some extra support, she stated that in that last few weeks, it seemed like he did not want to try. Ahmed told his teacher that he was still struggling with the language, and he did not participate in some activities. As a result, the teacher was wondering about his classroom participation and how she could guide him again. She also said that she would try to find some ways to guide him and support him to fully participate in classroom tasks. Furthermore, during an algebra test, Ahmed asked his teacher for clarifications and to check his answers more often than other students did. The teacher tried to help him by telling him to look back at his answer when he had something wrong. Then the teacher asked the students to do another task for extra credit. All the students took that chance except Ahmed. As I was observing the class, he looked at me and said, "I cannot do this." He added, "I do not know how to do it." In addition, in the interview, Ahmed told me that when he faced difficulties like in math class, "I do some work and then I do the rest at home so I get help from my parents." These results show that Ahmed faced challenges in his learning.

Moreover, in an interview with Ali, I asked him about his difficulties in learning English, and he said he faced some difficulties when it came to vocabulary that he could not understand. As a result, he also said it is very hard for him to do a presentation that was worth many points. He preferred to work on homework because he could finish it quickly and get good grades. Additionally, Ali did not like to work with girls, since it was culturally inappropriate; he preferred to work with boys. If he was asked to work with girls, he would stay quiet in the classroom unless the teacher changed his seat.

Furthermore, language support was a big concern for both sets of parents, as they believe that their children need extra support in all classes, particularly social studies and history classes, since they lack background knowledge in these two areas. In the parent survey, both sets of parents agreed that their children face some difficulties at school, and they agreed that their children need extra help in their second language.

The results show that students in this study are challenged in their learning both linguistically and culturally. The following sections will address the support these students receive and the other issues that may affect their learning in the classroom based on the study data.

5.2 What Do Teachers Perceive to Be the Needs of Their Arabic-Speaking ESL Students?

Two central themes arose to answer this question. The need for extra time and cultural awareness are discussed below.

5.2.1 The need for extra time

The results show that three out of four teachers perceived the need for extra time repeatedly; this is so teachers can give students extra support and additional explanations. In an interview with the History/English teacher, he referred to time as a main challenge for all teachers. This argument was also supported by the ESL teacher, as she stated that the ESL students “should have extra time with their work, they should have more explanation.” This teacher also insisted on the importance of time so the students can practice their second language with sufficient support from their teachers. She said, “Give students time to process because it takes processing time to translate in your head from one language to another.”

The results indicated that, in part, teachers cannot give their students the time and support they need because they have a large number of students in the classroom. The History/English teacher said “I have ninety-five kids and there's not enough time to introduce a new topic to thirty-two kids, it is just a smaller class that I have in the middle, but I have thirty-two and other classes and just say give everybody an individual education is just I don't think it's quite possible.” However, teachers try to do the best they can under these difficult circumstances. For example, the English/Social studies teacher helps the students individually with more explanations when needed. Moreover, the History/English teacher uses some strategies, such as pairing the ESL students with others who can give them some extra help beside the teacher's support when necessary.

In an interview with Ahmed, he said he likes his ESL class because it is the easiest class for him, and he can finish his class tasks on time before the period ends. One reason for this could be that the number of students in the ESL classroom is very small, so they have more opportunity to be helped by the ESL teacher, whereas the case is different in other mainstream classrooms. Despite the 45 minutes that the ESL students receive on a daily basis with the ESL teacher, they also need help from others. Based on classroom observations, the students face some difficulty in other classes to finish their tasks during class time. For example, in the Science/Health classroom observation, Ali was working on his task with some help from the teacher. Then the teacher announced that it was time to check the students' work. Ali was the first to be evaluated. The teacher's comment was that Ali finished part of the task, but some work still needed to be done, such as adding some definitions. In addition, during observations, both Ahmed and Ali sought more support and time to finish their tasks. For example, Ahmed asked the teacher for more clarifications about language meaning and content than anyone else in the class during the algebra test that was given at the beginning of the class. In addition, he took a longer time to hand back his paper; other students were already working on other tasks by the time he finished. The ESL students cannot receive the same support in the mainstream classes as they do in the ESL class because the teachers say they need to focus on other issues that are important for their own classrooms rather than focusing on the ESL students' linguistic needs. For example, the History/English teacher stated that, “In the regular English classes, some teachers focus more on the big pictures, some people focus more on the nuts and bolts grammatical stuff, we don't spend a whole lot of time on the grammatical issues.”

According to Egbert et al. (2007), sufficient time is important. They suggest that sufficient time and feedback is a necessary condition in the classroom. However, teachers may not have time

because of the number of students they have and their limited time in general. Therefore, it might be useful if other stakeholders, such as parents, cooperated with teachers so they can give their children extra time to finish their tasks at home. Palmer et al. (2007) believe that home support is necessary and important to assist ESL students. Thus, this argument highlights the importance of establishing good communication between teachers and parents of ESL students, discussed later in this paper.

5.2.2 The need for cultural awareness

According to the data, the teachers perceived that knowing about Arabic culture can help them to support the learning of the Arabic-speaking ESL students in the classroom. Although the teachers noted that they need more help to be culturally aware of their students' needs, they do a lot of work to find out more about their students and help them based on their cultural needs. For example, with her little experience with diverse students, the English/Social Studies teacher tries to do the best she can to help her Arabic-speaking ESL students. She explained the way she encourages her students to share their own culture with the rest of the class. She referred to an example of Ali as he leaves every Friday for prayer; the other students were curious to know why he leaves on Friday. To encourage sharing and to avoid misleading, the teacher asked Ali to tell the class about his Friday, and he shared his experience with them. Another example that acknowledges the teachers' awareness of their students to support them in their school life was stated by the ESL teacher. She said that, "Being aware and the school district's aware also they mention on our menu no pork for students; they can't eat pork and they have alternative foods." An additional example was that the ESL teacher watches her Arabic-speaking ESL students during Ramadan, the month where Muslims fast from dawn to sunset. She said, "When Ramadan occurs I tried to be aware of it in my classroom, but I also mention it to the office that Ramadan is occurring and we shouldn't have kids running on the playground when they can't drink water or eat food until tonight, at sundown, and then they put out the word to PE teachers." Although such awareness can help students in some ways, such as providing safe environments for students during Ramadan (Aburumuh, Smith & Ratcliffe, 2009; Ariza, 2006; Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 2002), there are other cultural issues explained below that need more attention.

According to Egbert et al. (2007), giving students authentic tasks can be a good option, as they can use their background knowledge, and this may give them an opportunity to interact and negotiate with others. Some teachers in this study enabled their students to share their culture with others, but it was mostly limited to certain topics and in certain classes. As it is important to share topics that are related to particular events, it is also important for Arabic-speaking ESL students to share their own important events, such as Ramadan, Eid al Fitr, and Eid al Adha. One of the parents disagreed that teachers support his child's culture and religion; his concern was about sharing the important days for Arab families. By giving them an opportunity to talk or write about such events, teachers can encourage the students to use their own background knowledge and facilitate better performance (Palmer et al., 2007; Santos & Suleiman, 1993; Wingfield & Karaman, 2001). It is also important to mention that such examples from Islam can work for all Muslims, who may speak different languages, but not for Arabic students who are not Muslim. Therefore, it is also important for teachers to be familiar with such differences (Aburumuh, Smith & Ratcliffe, 2009; Al-Hazza & Lucking, 2005; Wingfield, 2006). Thus, the opportunity to enable the students to share their own culture with other class members is

important (Brisk, 2010). As noted previously, Egbert et al. (2007) consider involving learners in authentic tasks, such as those involving their lives outside of school, as one of the three important learning conditions.

In short, the data show that the need for extra time and cultural awareness are two important themes for teachers in this study in order to support their Arabic-speaking ESL students in the classroom. Based on the findings in relation to the second research question, teachers need to be aware of their students' needs in order to help them accordingly. In addition, learning conditions should be taken into account; these include involving learners in authentic tasks, giving them opportunities to interact, and giving them sufficient time and feedback.

5.3 What Do Participants Perceive to Be the Factors That Influence the Learning of Arabic-Speaking ESL Students in the Classroom?

Two central themes arose from the data to answer this question. Two influences, cultural understanding and language support, are discussed below.

5.3.1 Cultural understanding

One major theme that participants perceived as influencing the learning of the Arabic-speaking ESL students is a lack of cultural understanding. This lack of understanding can be related to teachers, students, and families. For example, some teachers said that they were reluctant to talk about religion with students to avoid misunderstanding. In his interview, the History/English teacher said that, "A lot of times the issue of Islam comes up and I think I feel very strongly that I have to kind of bend over backwards to make sure that I'm not projecting Islam as a problem religion." This concern about students' differences like religion can be a challenge to teachers who lack sufficient knowledge about their students. Moreover, in another interview, the English/Social Studies teacher said that "I never know if I should ask about faith kind of questions. I don't know how open someone is to sharing that."

This lack of understanding can also occur when students avoid talking about their own religion and culture in the classroom. For example, Ahmed did not discuss his culture and religious beliefs in the classroom because, as he explained, "It is actually not allowed to talk about religion stuff in school." The student was not really happy to discuss this topic; follow-up questions put to him to find out more about this claim resulted in only short answers; each time, he referred to the law and the school regulations. He also said that, "It is in the law, well you can talk, but it is not preferred." Ahmed did not understand exactly what role religion could play in school. Egbert et al. (2007) argue that teachers need to help their students to attend mindfully to the learning process. In another interview with the Earth Science teacher about her experiences with Arabic-speaking ESL students, she commented that she failed to connect the classroom topic (how earth resources affect different cultures) with the student's culture (from Saudi Arabia), as he preferred not to talk about life in Saudi Arabia in the classroom. The teacher was confused, and she could not figure out the reason for not sharing his home culture in the classroom. The teacher also said that she wondered whether the student had any positive experiences, as he did not want to share about life in Saudi Arabia. However, the teacher believed that it was not a language barrier because the student understood what she was asking, and she said that it "may be a culture thing, he didn't think it was appropriate." As I asked her about her following up with the student to find

out the reason of not sharing his culture in the classroom, she said that the student told her he did not like to share because she is a woman. Therefore, it is important to learn about the possible factors that influence the students in the classroom, one of which is cultural differences.

According to Aubrey (2009), lack of understanding of cultural differences such as religion can affect students in the classroom. Therefore, it is necessary and important to understand these differences in order to provide support to the students who speak another language that is completely different from their teachers' and who come from another culture (Aburumuh, Smith & Ratcliffe, 2009; Al-Hazza & Lucking, 2005; Brisk, 1998; Brisk, 2010; Wingfield, 2006). Whether due to culture or language, the students face difficulties in their learning process. This can be due to lack of understanding of both teachers and students.

5.3.2 Sufficient language support

Another major factor that the teachers perceived as influencing the learning of their Arab students is language support. The teachers perceived that the Arabic-speaking ESL students face some difficulties in acquiring and using vocabulary but did not or could not offer the language support needed. The ESL teacher has more opportunities to support her students when they face difficulties in their language classes, whereas this is not the case in other mainstream classes because, as she said, “they assume all kids should know this vocabulary.” The data provide other examples where language support, or lack thereof, might have influenced the students' learning. For example, in one of the Healthy Living classroom observations, Ahmed was moving around as part of the class activity while he looked at the kitchen objects and wrote down some notes about the position of each item. As I reached him, he asked me in quiet Arabic about the name of the stove. He smiled at me as a thank you and then immediately wrote the new word down on his sheet. Then he moved around looking for something else; he opened a drawer and looked carefully at the items. After that, he looked at an electric device and again asked me in Arabic for its name. He smiled and wrote the word down on his sheet with some spelling mistakes. Although the student was working hard on his task, he faced some vocabulary issues that other students in the class did not. Without sufficient support in the classroom, he struggled to finish his task.

Ahmed also talked about the difficulties that he faced when communicating with teachers. He said that, “I just talk repeating the question and sometimes once use a substitute and teacher can't understand me, he asks me what I said like thousand times so another one of the students tell him what I meant.” Although Ahmed speaks the second language, he still needs further support before he can use the language appropriately and be understood by others. Lack of vocabulary and differences between the two languages (negative transfer), as noted in the literature, can be some reasons for the miscommunications.

Language support was also a big concern for parents, as both sets agreed that their children need extra help in their second language; they referred to language as one of the difficulties that their children are facing. The Earth Science teacher also agreed that students need language support and said that she tries to provide it in different ways. She explained that she was trying to give her students the help they needed to make things easier for them, but she still needs to do a lot of work before she can help them learn effectively and sufficiently. For example, she stated that

“How fast I talk is a big thing for the three of them (the Arabic-speaking ESL students) and so I try to slow down.” She also gives them copies of notes when they need extra help. This teacher asked Ahmed about his difficulties, and he responded, “I understand your words, but I don't know how to answer.” The teacher then added that “he is able as he put it to translate it word for word and know what each of the words means, but then to formulate an answer he said he struggles with.” This means that the student needs language support before he can use the language appropriately.

According to the data, lack of understanding and language support can be a struggle for both teachers and students alike. The students need a lot of language support, and the teachers need to find out how to give them sufficient support under the difficult conditions they have in school, such as too little time and other issues mentioned earlier. According to the literature, language support is very important; as Spolsky (1989) states, students need frequent opportunities to practice the language. Therefore, it is very important to consider learning styles and motivation to enable students to attend mindfully to the learning process (Egbert et al., 2007). In addition, lack of understanding can also hinder teachers from giving their Arabic-speaking ESL students authentic tasks (Egbert et al., 2007). In addition to these factors, teachers also face some other challenges in supporting their Arabic-speaking ESL students. These difficulties will be discussed in relation to the following research question.

5.4 What Do Teachers Perceive to Be the Problems Faced in Supporting These ESL Students in the Classroom?

Two central themes arose to answer this question. Teacher education and guidance as well as communication with parents are discussed below.

5.4.1 Teacher education and guidance

The first theme that addresses this question is the need for teacher learning opportunities. According to the data, the teachers perceived that one problem that challenges them is the lack of professional development focusing on the cultural and linguistic differences of Arab students. Three out of four teachers expressly and repeatedly talked about the need for more training about their students' cultures to support them in their language development. For example, the History/English teacher said, “I don't think we have a huge amount of training other than the fact of what we know and what we don't know.” He added, “I think you learn about your individual students by talking with them and by expressing concern and when they share something following it up, but you know we're not taught anything about Arabic culture other than what we learn I think.” In addition, during the interviews, three out of four teachers in this study professed to know just basic details about their Arabic-speaking ESL students' cultures and backgrounds. For example, the History/English teacher knew some details about some of his ESL students in general, but not specifics; he mentioned that “I don't know much about Arabic students. I know some religious details, I know some history details, but not much, particularly about what's important to Arabic people.” Adding to that, the Earth Science teacher clearly stated her lack of experience with Arabic-speaking ESL students' cultures and background knowledge as she stated that “I am so unfamiliar with actually the Arabic culture or what is in their background.” The Earth Science teacher clarified the necessity of getting to know more details about her students. She explicitly asked for guidance as well as credible and reliable information to help

teachers understand their particular students' needs. Although the English/Social Studies teacher did not talk about teacher education, she mentioned that she learned about Arabic cultures from her previous history classes, from an Arab friend, and from her Arab students; she added that she always needs to keep learning.

According to the literature, integrating students' backgrounds into classroom activities is very important and necessary to support English language learners (Brisk, 2010; Dong, 2004; Gilmore, 2007; Gilmore, 2011; Lee, 2004; Melvin & Stout, 1987; Palmer et al., 2007). Teachers in this study need appropriate knowledge to support their Arabic-speaking ESL students; a lack of knowledge may prevent teachers from giving students authentic tasks to encourage them to participate in classroom activities (Egbert et al., 2007). Having said that, teachers in the study claimed to be doing the best they can to support their students. However, such support can be difficult when teachers lack adequate understanding of their students. The teachers in this study stated that they perceive a real need for further education and guidance focusing on Arabic-speaking ESL students in order to support them in their language and content learning.

5.4.2 Communication with parents

Another issue that the teachers see as a challenge is the lack of communication with parents. According to the data, the teachers perceived that they were not able to communicate effectively and efficiently with parents in order to support the ESL students culturally, socially, and academically. As the ESL teacher stated, even though most of the time one of the parents of the ESL students speaks English, there are other challenges that may widen the gap between teachers and parents. For example, in an interview with the History/English teacher about meeting with Arabic-speaking ESL students' parents, he said, "I feel bad that I haven't met Ahmed's parents." Instead, he only emails them when necessary. The teacher adds that if the parents don't have a problem, and they don't come to see him or don't email him, he usually doesn't talk to them. This problem of communication with parents can be partly attributed to language, as the ESL teacher and the English/Social Studies teachers said. Moreover, the English/Social Studies teacher believes that communication with parents is very important, and she therefore felt that there was a real need to establish good communication with them. The teacher said that "I have had students from all over the world and again not really any problems communicating with them, but sometimes with parents it is a little difficult and that's always been a concern to me." In addition, both sets of parents disagree that teachers contact them regularly to ensure sufficient support to their children. In general, the mainstream teachers in this study do not participate in regular communication with the parents of the ESL students. The ESL teacher said that "If a parent has trouble with English, everybody should know to slow down their speaking, just slow down, clarify words as you go along and try to understand what the parent is saying or asking, and we have people in offices and teachers who don't understand that."

Furthermore, when teachers were asked about their preferred communication method with parents, most of them preferred to have face-to-face communication because they could understand better with facial expressions; they suggested that communication would not be possible otherwise. The Earth Science teacher said, "I have tried [to communicate with parents] over the telephone I think is the worst one because some of them with their accent you can't understand and on the telephone you can't even see a facial expression." The teachers prefer

face-to-face interaction because it helps them get the message clearly, whereas understanding can be difficult to achieve when using other methods. In fact, some of the teachers, like the Earth Science teacher, totally disagree with using email as a method of communication with parents because, as she said, “I have struggled with some of the parents’ sentence structure, just the way they type, the way they word their stuff, you’re reading it, and you don’t really know what they’re trying to ask.”

According to the literature, working with parents can be an important issue in supporting ESL students, so teachers need to consider communication and cooperation with parents to ensure adequate support for the students (Brisk, 1998; Brisk, 2010; Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 2002; Dong, 2004; Santos & Suleiman, 1993). One idea can be inviting families to participate in classroom activities (Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 2002). The literature notes that parents can be a good source of information about their culture. Thus, teachers can use this knowledge to provide authentic tasks for these students (Egbert et al., 2007) in order to help them achieve efficient language and content learning.

To sum up, the need for education and guidance as well as communication difficulties are among the problems that teachers perceived that they face in the classroom. Teacher education can provide teachers with appropriate ways to support their struggling students. For example, by being aware of the students’ needs, teachers can provide them with authentic tasks to increase their participation in the classroom (Egbert et al., 2007). In addition, parents can also be a good source of knowledge about their students so teachers can benefit from such opportunities, as indicated in the literature.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the study results, six challenges (time, cultural awareness, cultural understanding, language support, teacher education/guidance, and parent communication) were highlighted in relation to the literature, the participants’ perceptions, and the three learning conditions. For example, lack of time can be a challenge to students if they have difficult tasks, if teachers speak/write quickly, or if they lack sufficient support. Thus, teachers and students may need to negotiate their activities so that students have appropriate time and teachers have time to provide feedback. In addition, teachers and students can pay attention to cultural awareness because gaining awareness can help teachers give their students authentic tasks and hence support them based on their background, and it can also help students participate more easily. If teachers become more aware of their students’ cultures and students are given a chance to share their own culture and knowledge with parent support, students may make learning gains more effectively. Furthermore, teacher education is important because when teachers lack knowledge about their students’ culture and language, they can face challenges in supporting their students. It is clear from the study results that challenges can face both students and teachers. Teachers need support because they are struggling to find appropriate ways to help their students. Each teacher is trying to do the best he or she can; however, without sufficient help and support from everyone involved in the learning process, it can be difficult to teach effectively. Parents, students, teachers, and school administrators can be part of the learning process and play a role in overcoming these challenges.

7. IMPLICATIONS

7.1 For Research

Due to the limited time of this study and the lack of studies that focus on Arabic-speaking ESL students in U.S. public schools, there are a number of important issues that need to be taken into account for future studies. First, it is important to find out whether larger or more diverse populations can lead to the same results. For example, this study focused on two Arabic-speaking students from two Arab regions, but other studies may include different regions with larger populations. This study also focused on two male students; future studies could include females or both genders to explore whether females have different views and challenges than males. Another study could look at perceptions of pre-service teachers who receive education about Arabic-speaking ESL students. A study like this could provide evidence as to whether teacher education can help teachers to better work with Arabic-speaking ESL students. Third, the current study focused on middle school students, but future studies could include other levels of learners. For example, research with students in high schools with different experiences could add more to these findings.

7.2 For Teaching

Families are very important in the learning process to help their children get a better education. Based on the findings of this study, it seems that there was not much communication between families and the mainstream teachers. This lack of communication needs to be taken into account, and some ways to establish good relationships with these families needs to be found. The literature indicates that language and/or culture can be barriers that may prevent these families from coming to school and participating in school activities. However, it is also clear that inviting families to share their language and culture in a particular activity in the classroom may encourage them to participate. Overall, communicating with families may help teachers to provide support to Arabic-speaking ESL students.

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