

# Students' Perceptions Of The Arabic Language Curriculum

**Olaniyan-Shobowale, K.O**

Faculty Of Education, Department Of Language,  
Arts And Social Science Education,  
Lagos State University

*Abstract: This study is an investigation of students' perceptions of the Arabic language curriculum used across Senior Secondary Schools in Lagos State. Results from the study showed that, indeed, the students find the curriculum difficult, boring, not well taught and not meeting with their contemporary need for foreign language study. They however, opined that Arabic is a valuable tool for career advancement as an international language of communication, diplomacy and tourism. The study concludes on the recommendations that the Arabic curriculum should be updated and reviewed with communicative competence as focus of instruction.*

*Keywords: Arabic, Curricular, Communication, Perception, Communicative Competence*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Arabic Language is exclusively studied at two different levels in Nigeria; Government owned and publicly runned schools and privately owned Muslim schools. The constitution through the NPE (2014) guarantees the right of students to study the language as an optional subject from the Junior Secondary School up to the Senior Secondary School. At these levels, Arabic is learnt as a Foreign Language (FL), while it is learnt as an aspect of Islamic studies at the primary school level.

Another type of school available in Nigeria for the study of Arabic language is the "locally" controlled Arabic schools. So called because they are not regulated by the government and do not operate a unified curriculum. They offer instructions in Islamic Education and its sciences in the medium of Arabic and or the local language. Unlike the aforementioned Government owned and privately owned Muslim Schools, Arabic at the local controlled Arabic Schools is a compulsory component of the curriculum. Students here are required to take it up to the proficiency level. The rationale behind such requirement is to equip students with the necessary language skills to read materials on Islam in Arabic, particularly the Qur'an and Ahaadith, since the major objectives of such schools are to spread the message of Islam.

The aim of this study was to evaluate perceptions of Senior Secondary Students at the government owned schools, who are studying Arabic as an optional and a foreign language.

At its most basic level, curriculum refers to "a plan of learning activities and experiences that students will encounter in the classroom. (Olivia, 2005). Curriculum here in this study denotes the written documents that specify the objective, topics, methods and material of the Arabic class. Evaluation means the systematic collection and analysis of relevant information needed to promote the importance of the curriculum thereby assessing the effectiveness or otherwise of Arabic instruction.

The issues of curriculum, its development and evaluation for Arabic generally and as a FL have not received sufficient attention from researchers and language teaching professionals in Nigeria. Aside the Hunwick's and Salim Hakim's studies and reports of 1965 and 1961 respectively, no other known or documented government interventions have been noted. The reason for this lapse may not be far-fetched, as stakeholders and school authorities alike perceive Arabic language as a "religious tool" which is only useful and relevant to Muslims. It is thus still taught as such by teachers.

It should be noted however, that the Arabic language is becoming more essential in education all over the world as a strategic language for security purpose and also in daily life

due to the vital role it plays in communication chains throughout the world. Therefore, as the prevalence of the Arabic language grows, so should its education to meet the need and demands of a changing world.

It is also note-worthy that the focus in FL teaching has shifted from the nature of the language to the learner (Yilmaz, 2011) and, consequently the learners have become the focus of the learning and teaching process. According to and as alluded to by researches on curricular, learners' have different needs and interests. These, ultimately influence their passion for and motivation to learn and determines the effectiveness of their learning (Hutchingsin and Waters, 1987).

Different studies indicate that curriculum developers, planners and implementers need to know about learner's needs, such as their objectives for learning a language, language attitude, expectations from the course and learning habits in order to be able to design an efficient curriculum (Kaur, 2007; Xenodohidia, 2002). These information, it is believed will be helpful in providing a procedure for using information about learners which will in turn guide the course design, syllabus design and curriculum development.

An informal survey by this researcher, portrays a feeling of dissatisfaction expressed on numerous occasions by the students regarding the Arabic language curriculum, the methods used by teachers and the overall effectiveness of the language in meeting everyday language needs of learners. Thus, it is interesting to find out through a standard instrument, students' perceptions of the Arabic curriculum. This study will be guided by the following Research Questions:

- ✓ Are the objectives of the Arabic curriculum adequate in meeting learners' need for basic communication and career choice.
- ✓ How do Arabic students perceive the curriculum content in meeting their contemporary need to learn a foreign language.
- ✓ What are their perception of the instructional methods and materials available to learn Arabic.

## II. RELEVANCE OF FL EDUCATION

Learning to speak a FL is the acquiring of any ability to express through oneself in different sounds and different words through the use of different grammar from the native language of the learner (Mackey, 1992). The relevance of learning of foreign language(s) can be connected to the survival of the human race and the need to learning FL as almost as old as human history itself.

Kirkeby (2008) highlighted the following reasons as to why people learn a FL, which may be for:

- ✓ *PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT*: The knowledge of a new language open new horizons, allows the learner to gain new identity while reinforcing his own identity and gain self confidence
- ✓ *CULTURAL REASONS*: The knowledge of a FL gives the learner access to other cultures and ability to communicate and exchange views with the people of the target language

- ✓ *ECONOMIC REASONS*: The knowledge of FL no doubt will increase job opportunities in many careers where knowing another language is a real asset
- ✓ *EDUCATIONAL REASONS*: Several studies have alluded to the fact that the knowledge of FL can greatly benefit reading and writing in one's own language as there are also evidence that, like musical education, FL education contributes significantly to the development of individuals' intelligence. As reported by Jadwat (1987), neurolinguistic researchers have suggested that people who know more than one language make use of their brain more than monolinguals, are verbally more skillful, have better auditory memory and are better at intuiting meaning from unknown words than monolinguals. Buttressing this fact, Wiley (1985) examined the correlation between high school FL study and success in college. He found that those who study Latin, French, German or Spanish may be expected to perform better academically in college than students of equal academic ability who do not take a foreign language. Arabic language is studied in Nigerian public secondary schools as a foreign language. However, unlike the aforementioned relevance of foreign the motivation to learn Arabic does not usually extend beyond its attachment and relevance to the Islamic Faith. This fact, coupled with other factors has somewhat grossly affected enrolment for it at all levels in Nigerian schools.

The Senior Secondary Arabic Curricular under review, contains a total of one hundred and thirty three (133) topics spread across six major themes of Reading Comprehension (Al-Qiraa), Translation (English to Arabic and Arabic to English), Dictation (imla'a), Grammar (Nahu), Literature (Adab ) and writing composition (Insha'a). A cursory look shows that the maximum concentration of topics (37) is under reading comprehension of Arabic passages ranging from issues like school life, the market place, a happy family, and festivals and so on This is closely followed by grammar with 36 topics; literature comes next with a total of 22 topics and this range from the literatures of-Arabs before Islam, the history of Arab literature and Arabic poems of contemporary African poets.

Translation consists of 20 topics, writing compositions a mere 10 topics and the least of the group is dictation with only 8 topics.

The SSAC made mention of sustaining learners' interest in Arabic already aroused at the junior secondary level in items (1) and (2) of its overall objectives. A cursory look at the JSS curriculum depicts a content that is over loaded with grammar, literature and reading activities. This implies that learners who have not had any background knowledge of Arabic language outside the school are very likely to find the curriculum challenging. How this will help in sustaining the few who manage to enroll for the language is the question that is begging for an answer. Ideally, senior secondary school curriculum should be a continuation of the Junior Secondary School (JSS) and should be an elementary course designed to introduce learners of Arabic as a foreign language to the basic structures of Arabic and to its uses in common situations of everyday communication. The resultant implication of this is the attrition rate for Arabic at the senior secondary school

level and consequently at the higher institution that studies of Oderinde (2007) depicts.

As regards objective 2, the SSAC mentions improving learners' Arabic linguistic skill by building on the foundation laid at the JSS. It is noteworthy that there, are generally four language skills in any language and Arabic is no exception. Since there is no mention of any specific language skills to teach, the one that is often taught and given priority in Arabic classroom by teachers are the reading and writing skills at the expense of the speaking and listening skills. This same trend is carried on to the classroom as the content of the SSAC indicates.

Another critical remark that is noted is in relation to the 3 overall objectives that state... 'Giving learners adequate opportunities for the use of the language in speech and in writing' One is compelled to query why then the bulk of the curriculum content is concentrated on reading comprehension, grammar and literature. Modern language learning theory reveals that learning to speak a language is much less cognitively complex than is learning to read and write that language and that the students who are exposed to immersive learning environment first learn to communicate orally, and then go on to have better achievement in reading and writing following the development pattern of native language acquisition and learning. As suggested by Nergis (2011), foreign language learning is most effective when it takes place through an interactive and meaningful way. Loading the curriculum up with many reading, grammar and literature activities will not ensure a communicative competent student whose aim of studying Arabic is mainly to interact. It can, hence, be concluded that the SSAC overall objectives are not in consonance with the selected classroom expected behavioural objectives.

The next remark is related to item 5. The document as intended is expected to "motivate the learner to continue his study of Arabic both formally and informally'. As evident from attrition rate for Arabic at both the senior secondary school level and the higher institutions of learning, this objective it can be said is not being realized as fewer students are enrolling for the language. The reason for this may not be far-fetched as there is hardly any other motivating factor for learning the language than that of religious. To be motivated to learn a foreign language, there has to be other incentives ranging from instrumental motivation that is (an added advantage to getting better placement at jobs), integrative motivation (as a means of social integration with speakers of the language) and for intellectual stimulation.

To motivate learners, this study advocates a more communicative approach at teaching Arabic. when learners learn to communicate - however minimal in a language- they will be spurred on to study it beyond their present level. Hence, as earlier analyzed, the SSAC content should de-emphasis grammar, literature, reading which are all reminiscence of the grammar translation method.

Perhaps the only item among the objectives that is in congruence with the content of the SSAC is item '4' which states that ... "to enable learner to use standard Arabic as a vehicle for self improvement through reading for enlightenment and information. Indeed the content is loaded with reading activities that cut across different topics of varied

information. One is, therefore, compelled to conclude that the emphasis of the SSAC is on developing learners' reading skill.

As regards teaching materials, the curriculum suggested appropriate materials such as pictures, films, audio tapes, and flash cards. The use of these materials is envisaged by the curriculum planners to facilitate learning and teaching and to concretize learning. It is however observed that there is a very wide gap between the curriculum as intended and what is obtained in its classroom implementation as there is a dearth of instructional materials in schools generally and to teach Arabic language specifically.

In terms of teaching methods, the SSAC proposed an approach to language learning that does not support the principles of life-long learning and the building of independent learners. The strategies planned more or less favour the same age old grammar-translation method that does not enhance communicative competence in learners. Ideally, the curriculum should be responsible in encouraging teachers to provide learners with stimulating and engaging activities of speaking and listening as often as possible, providing them ample opportunities to become more independent in language learning, promoting peer and group work activities to make learners practice Arabic.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted among forty-eight senior secondary school student randomly selected from three schools in lagos state, Nigeria.

A questionnaire containing 30 questions was prepared to find students perceptions for the Arabic curriculum from four different aspects of the curriculum: (a) Skills (b) methods used by teachers (c) materials availability (d) objectives of the curriculum .Analysis of responses was done using the descriptive analysis.

		Percentage
No	48	100%
Male	32	66.6%
Female	16	33.3%

Table 1: Analysis of respondents by gender

Table 2: Analysis of students' perception of the curriculum objectives and content.

S/N	ITEMS	N	YES	NO
1.	The Arabic I am taught is sufficient to meet my future career needs	48 100%	05 10.41%	43 89.9%
2.	My needs should determine the content of what I am taught		12 25%	36 75%
3.	The objectives of learning Arabic is clear to me		20 41.7%	28 58.3%
4.	What I am taught will improve my listening skill		12 25%	36 75%
5.	What I am taught will make me speak Arabic fluently		02 4.7%	46 95.3%
6.	The focus of my Arabic class is on grammar		40 83.3%	08 16.7%

7.	The Arabic literature I am taught is simple and interesting	05 10.41%	43 89.9%
8.	My reading ability in Arabic is further enhanced in the class	36 75%	12 25%
9.	My previous knowledge of Arabic has been enhanced	22 45.8%	26 51.2%
10.	If the opportunity presents itself, I can speak Arabic with an Arab now	02 4.7%	4 95.3%

Table 2: perceptions of Arabic students of the Arabic curriculum

From the analysis above presented, majority of the respondents (89.9%) are of the opinion that the Arabic language instruction received does not meet their aspirations for the future while a vast majority of the (75.3%) cannot speak Arabic despite the instruction received. In the same vain, majority of the respondents alluded to the fact that the focus of the Arabic instruction is on Grammar (83.3%) and also that the literature aspect of the curriculum is not interesting and find it difficult (89.9%). The implication of this findings and analysis is that Arabic is still taught as an old classical language that focuses more on grammar and achaic literature

Rate the following aspects and language skills in the order of importance to your desire of learning Arabic

S/N	SKILL	NO	MOST IMPORTANT	AVERAGE IMPORTANT	NOT IMPORTANT
11.	Reading Skill	48	48%	47%	5%
12.	Writing Skill	48	48%	48%	4%
13.	Speaking Skill	48	85%	12%	03%
14.	Listening Skill	48	72%	24%	4%
15.	Grammar	48	15%	33%	52%
16.	Literature	48	03%	35%	62%

Table 3: Analysis Arabic of students' preference for different language skills

Although all skills are relevant, from the table and analysis done, the students are of the view that speaking skills should be the most vital aspect of learning Arabic with (85%). This implies, and depicts the need of the students for a more communicative teaching approach. This corroborates Schulz (1999) view that, in the pass 2 decades, foreign language curricular has moved from a focus on grammar and vocabulary to a focus on communicative proficiency in real life context. The implication of this finding according to Yilmaz (2011), is that language teachers should not insist on students' using correct grammar structure and pronunciation but rather should expect them to convey the message while speaking and answering questions in class. This, afterall is the purpose of communication- to convey information.

S/N	ITEMS	NO	YES%	NO%
17.	During Arabic class, we work in groups	48 48	2 4.2%	46 95.8%
18.	My Arabic teacher speaks Arabic during classes	48	12 25%	36 75%
19.	Compared to the English class, my Arabic class is	48	15 31.3%	33 68.7%

	boring			
20.	Information on Arab culture would my the class interesting		40 83.3%	08 16.7%
21.	Arab culture has been included into the topics I am taught		05 10.4%	43 89.6%

Table 4: Perceptions of students towards method

(83%) of the respondents reveal that they would want the Arab culture infused into class activities. This is corroborated by Thansoulas (2001) assertion that if languages are taught without their cultures, students become strangers who are not familiar with the target language. Apparent from the analysis is the perception of (68.7%) that they find the Arabic class boring relative the English language class. This is perhaps because, Arabic teachers still resort to the use of the traditional grammar-translation method and do not utilize instructional materials during instructions, a combination of which is guaranteed to make learners passive participants in the class.

S/N	ITEMS	NO	YES%	NO%
22.	Arabic textbooks are readily available	48 48	2 25%	36 75%
23.	Arabic textbooks are colourful		08 16.7%	40 83.3%
24.	Arabic textbooks are describes real life solutions		16 33.3%	32 66.7%
25.	The topics in the textbooks are interesting		06 12.5%	42 87.5%
26.	My teacher provides additional materials		10 20.8%	38 79.1%
27.	My teacher uses Audio-Visual materials		04 8.3%	44 91.7%
28.	Arabic textbooks are loaded with grammar		40 83.3%	08 16.7%
29.	I easily find Arabic textbooks in my school library		02 4.2%	46 95.8%
30.	Arabic textbooks are sufficient for my language needs		05 10.4%	43 89.6%

Task 5: perceptions of students towards learning materials

From the analysis above and as corroborated (Oderinde and Badmus 2007, 2001) there is a serious limitation and shortage in the variety, richness and volume of resources available to students learning Arabic as a foreign language. Brown (2001) affirms that "the most obvious and common form of materials support for language instruction comes through textbooks or course books". An addition is a vast lack of other instructional materials that could facilitate learning. Thus, Arabic is learnt in abstract, uninteresting and highly passive class. There are serious limitation in the variety, richness and volume of resources available to teach Arabic language. Up-to-date textbooks and materials, which focus on all language skills equally, on speaking skills specifically and include daily life realities, would meet the needs of the students, motivate them to study Arabic beyond the classroom (perhaps even further studies in it), and provide an enabling and conclusive environment for studying.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

If language learning is to be successful, the learner's needs, rather than the structure of the learning must be the basic instrument of curricular and instruction.

FL curriculum need to move from a focus on grammar and vocabulary to a focus on communicative proficiency in real life context. The expectations and objective of teaching Arabic need to be clearly stated. In order to motivate learners, need to be encouraged to convey the message learnt in class by attempting to speak the target language. Arabic teachers also need to inform learners about the culture and society of Arabic native speakers.

As a teaching strategy, group work activities, role-plays in classes should also be applied by Arabic teachers. As it is a well known fact of student-centered teaching, that group work activities increase students' ability to cooperate and learn from others, therefore enabling them to be responsible for their own learning and reducing their reliance on the teacher group work has also shown to enable students share their thinking, brainstorm ideas, learn to consult, evaluate and edit the contribute of group member and take pride their work as individuals and as members of a team.

Arabic being is one of the less commonly taught language is plagued with myriad of problems. One of the biggest of such problems is the shortage of textbooks and lack of instructional materials.

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