Achieving the Advanced Oral Proficiency in Arabic: A Case Study

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Abstract: This article is based on a case study of a white American graduate student, Mark, who achieved “Superior” oral proficiency in Arabic according to the ACTFL’s Oral Proficiency Scale. Based on multiple data sources (e.g., interviews, observation, document analysis), the study highlights Mark’s multiple identities as a language learner, language instructor, and as a (non)member of a target language community. It is hoped that the study will inspire and inform language learners and educators of LOTES (languages other than English), particularly, of LCTLs (less commonly taught languages), such as Arabic.

Key words: advanced speaker, case study

Language: Arabic

Introduction

How does one reach native-like proficiency in a foreign or second language? Existing literature (e.g., Byrnes, 2006; Byrnes, Weger-Gunthorp, & Sprang, 2005; Leaver & Shekhtman, 2002) indicates that there is only a small number of language learners who can attain such proficiency. Consequently, we have very limited research about them. In particular, research on how their personal and linguistic profiles have facilitated or hindered their second language (L2) acquisition is scarce.

As a nonnative user of English and a Second Language Acquisition researcher, I have always been interested in knowing what makes some people more successful than others in reaching high levels of proficiency in commonly or less commonly taught languages. When Mark (not his real name) came to see me during my office hours to discuss his PhD program in Foreign and Second Language Education, my long-term curiosity was transformed into a research inquiry. I noticed that he wore headphones when he came in. I asked him, just out of curiosity, what he was listening to. He told me that he was listening to Arabic news and other recorded materials to improve his Arabic. He went on to tell me that in order to immerse himself in Arabic, he records news, music, and TV programs on his iPod and listens to them wherever he goes. I was quite intrigued by this and began to ask him a series of questions about his Arabic language learning experience.

In this article, in order to gain some insights into his personal and linguistic journey, I report the results from a case study of Mark, an American graduate
Individual Differences in Second Language Learning

Historically, researchers (Carroll, 1967; Cohen, 1977; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975) in foreign and second language education have always been interested in understanding the secret behind being “good language learners.” Perhaps one of the most influential studies on this topic is the “The Good Language Learner” study conducted by Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, and Todesco (1996) in the mid-1970s. The researchers studied a group of good language learners to examine whether their personal characteristics were significantly correlated with self-reported language proficiency, and if there were any significant differences between them and less successful language learners. The study revealed that good language learners differ from less successful counterparts in terms of their motivation, intellectual abilities, personality, and learning preferences (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). More specifically, the researchers found that adult good language learners seem to employ five strategies: (a) actively involve themselves in language learning task; (b) develop or exploit an awareness of language as a system; (c) develop and exploit an awareness of language as a means of communication and interaction; (d) realize initially or with time that they must cope with the affective demands made upon them by language learning and succeed in doing so; and (e) constantly revise their L2 system” (Naiman et al., 1996, pp. 30–33).

Similarly, based on the existing literature in SLA, Lightbown and Spada (2006) identified learner characteristics which might influence the success or failure of a second language acquisition process. The variables that they included in their discussion were as follows: intelligence, aptitude, learning styles, personality, motivation and attitudes, identity and ethnic group affiliation, learner beliefs, and age of acquisition (see Lightbown & Spada, 2006, for further discussion). At the same time, however, they pointed out some of the problems

Theoretical Background

After the September 11 tragedies, the interest in learning Arabic in the United States increased dramatically (Husseiniali, 2006). Welles (2004), for example, reports that between the fall of 1998 and of 2002, enrollment in Arabic courses in higher education institutions in the United States increased from 5,505 to 10,585. In fact, according to a recent survey, Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall, 2006, Arabic enrollment went up 127% (Ferman, Goldberg, & Lustin, 2007). Yet, little is known as to what motivates these students to learn Arabic (Husseiniali, 2006) or even less is known about the individuals who have successfully achieved proficiency beyond a beginning or intermediate level of proficiency in Arabic. It is important to point out that recently the Modern Language Association (2007) has removed Arabic from the list of less commonly taught languages (LCTLS). It is reported that 23,974 students are currently studying Arabic placing it in the top ten most commonly taught languages in the United States for the first time. However, since Arabic was a LCTL when Mark began learning it 13 years ago, and since it is only a recent phenomenon that it has changed its status to a commonly taught language,1 I will refer to Arabic as a LCTL throughout the article.

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student who achieved superior-level proficiency in Arabic, according to the ACTFL scale. The study aims to highlight some personal attributes that Mark has as a language learner and his relationships with the target language communities in order to uncover the factors which had facilitated or hindered in his acquisition of Arabic. It is hoped that the study will inspire and inform other language learners, as well as educators, and add some new dimensions to the existing literature on advanced language learners in general, and specifically on learners of less commonly taught languages.
related to the existing research on the individual differences and L2 learning, which have been mostly quantitative studies. First, they mentioned that defining and measuring these variables (e.g., aptitude, motivation, extroversion, intelligence) is challenging and problematic, because they are not directly observable nor measurable. Hence, a researcher has to rely on the participants' self-report on a questionnaire which may not always be reliable. Second, much existing research on individual differences were correlational studies. While these studies can reveal possible relationships between two variables (e.g., motivation and language proficiency), one cannot assume that there is a causal relationship between the two, hence, making the interpretation of the results difficult and tentative.

Despite these challenges, Lightbown and Spada (2006) assert that "research in this area is of great importance to both researchers and educators. Researchers seek to know how different cognitive and personality variables are related and how they interact with learners' experiences so that they can gain a better understanding of human learning" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, pp. 56–57).

More recently, researchers in the field have increasingly employed qualitative research methods to better understand intricate relationships among variables or characteristics that may explain success or failure in second language learning (e.g., Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2001). In fact, Norton and Toohey (2001) challenged the "Good Language Learner" study by Naiman et al. (1996) by pointing out that the characteristics that were revealed by the study were too limited in their scope, and that the study did not refer to how good language learners situated themselves vis-à-vis a target language community. By drawing on sociocultural perspectives, they compared two (adult and child) "good language learners" from their previous studies conducted independently (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995; Toohey, 1996, 1998, 2000) by using a variety of qualitative data gathering techniques such as interviews, participant observations, journals, and videotaping. Unlike the previous studies on "good language learners" (e.g., Naiman et al., 1996), which focused on the personality traits or learning strategies of participants, Norton and Toohey (2002) explored how the good language learners situated themselves vis-à-vis the target language communities and gained access to the communities. They discovered that both adult and child language learners were successful in gaining access to a target language community by relying on social resources through "community or extracommunity allies" (p. 317). With the help of the allies, the two language learners were able to negotiate their identities from stigmatized identities (ESL immigrant and ESL learner) to empowered identities (multilingual resource and nice little girl). Based on the study, Norton and Toohey (2006) emphasized the importance of studying good language learners not only "in what they did individually but also in the possibilities their various communities offer them" (p. 318). Furthermore, they asserted that identifying individual characteristics of good language learners does not sufficiently inform us about them unless we pay "attention to social practices in the contexts in which individuals learn L2s" (p. 318).

While qualitative research methods do not claim to generalize the findings, they offer language researchers a different set of lenses by focusing on a small group of participants in depth from emic perspectives. For the present study, I employed a single case study method by focusing on an American male who has successfully achieved an advanced level of oral proficiency in Arabic by exploring his personal and linguistic journey.

**Definitions of Advanced Language Learner**

Defining what constitutes an advanced language learner has been problematic, to say the least. Norris (2005), for example, points out a wide variety of criteria that
researchers have employed as an index of “advancedness.” Based on his review of the existing literature on advanced language learners from 1998 to 2004, he lists 10 different indicators of “advancedness.” Yet, perhaps the most commonly used indicator among language researchers and educators is the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (Byrnes, 2002) and an advanced or a superior rating on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). According to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, the Superior Level is defined as follows:

This term implies the extensive treatment of a topic. Superior speakers are not limited to a few simple remarks as commentary; rather they treat a topic amply and express themselves fully. They sustain an idea and develop it through complex utterances that are linked syntactically and thematically. Superior speakers are able to take short linguistic detours for elaboration and exemplification without losing the thrust of the idea and its development. Extended discourse is a communicative building process in both form and meaning. It requires control of discourse structure, cohesiveness, and linguistic facility in the functions of the Superior level: detailed description, detailed narration, expressing and defining opinions, developing an argument and hypothesizing. (ACTFL, 1999, p. 29)

For the present study, I used the ACTFL OPI score reported by the participant as well as two separate evaluations by Arabic professors on the participant’s oral proficiency in Arabic as an indicator of advancedness.

Research on Advanced Language Learners

The existing research in SLA has focused on the learners who are beginning or intermediate (Leaver & Shekhtman, 2002). As a result, there has been a scarcity of research which helps us understand why some learners are able to achieve high-level language proficiency in LOTEs (languages other than English), particularly, in LCTLs such as Arabic.

One of the few qualitative studies on advanced language learners published to date is a study by Leaver and Atwell (2002) in which they identified the attributes of level 4 speakers (as defined in the Interagency Language Roundtable proficiency descriptors), their experiences, factors contributing to their proficiency, and their opinion regarding study at 3+/4 level. They collected the data via interviews, e-mail responses, and written narratives from the participants. The participants were identified through personal contacts, Defense Language Institute records, and referrals from other participants. All the participants scored level 4 or higher in speaking. Some characteristics that the participants shared included: polyglotism, instrumental motivation, use of authentic texts in preparation, check presentations with native speaker, want feedback, unified bicultural personality, and focus on sociolinguistics in speaking (p. 267). In their summary, Leaver and Atwell (2002) assert that more research needs to be conducted on advanced language learners to form a basis for a new language program. They stated that, “Few researchers, if any, have explored what Level-4 language proficiency is and how individuals achieve it . . . We have found that there are stories to be told by language learners at this level, and those stories are varied, rich, and well worth the several hours of listening time it takes a language user to relate his or her experience” (pp. 278–279, emphasis added).

The present study explores the trajectory of an American male student who has successfully achieved a superior level in speaking Arabic as he unfolds his linguistic and personal journey as a language learner and teacher. Based on the previous studies on good and advanced language learners (Leaver & Atwell, 2002; Naiman et al., 1978; Norton & Toohey, 2001), the present
study aims to identify some personal characteristics and attributes of an advanced language learner of a LCTL, Arabic, by analyzing interviews, written narratives, and e-mail exchanges with the participant. In addition, the study explores sociocultural factors that helped or hindered the participant's L2 acquisition by examining the participant's perceptions of the target language community and the native speakers.

Method

The Participant

Mark is a 39-year-old white American male. He was born in Michigan, raised in Florida, and did his undergraduate study in Arabic at a large Midwestern university. He then completed his MA in Arabic literature at the same university where he is currently pursuing his PhD in Foreign and Second Language Education. He teaches Arabic as a graduate teaching associate at the university. He had been studying Arabic for 13 years when I first interviewed him.

I chose to use a single case study method. A case study is defined as "a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes" (Cresswell, 2007, p. 73). I chose an intrinsic case study (Stake, 2003, pp. 136–137) because my interest is to increase my understanding of a particular case, Mark as an advanced language learner. I was not interested in theory building nor in generalizing the findings to other cases. But what can we learn from a single case? According to Stake (2003), by reading "experiential and contextual accounts" by case researchers, we can increase both "propositional and experiential knowledge" (p. 145). In other words, we construct and expand our knowledge by vicariously experiencing how other language learners such as Mark have achieved high proficiency in the target language.

I employed a purposeful convenient sampling strategy by which "a researcher selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Cresswell, 2007, p. 125). Furthermore, as locating advanced speakers in the United States is a great challenge since "except for US government testing records, no lists of such learners are kept on the file anywhere" (Leaver & Atwell, 2002, p. 279), focusing on a single case at this point seems both beneficial and feasible to gain in-depth insights into a linguistic and personal journey of a successful Arabic learner. This does not mean that Mark is "the best" or "the only" American who had achieved the superior or advanced level proficiency in Arabic, nor that his case is generalizable. I am sure that there are other Americans who have achieved a high proficiency in Arabic; however, he may be one of the few, in my opinion, who is very articulate about his language learning experience and is willing to share his own experience with other language learners and educators. In fact, initially, I sent the interview questions to 10 potential participants who are advanced speakers in less commonly taught languages such as Japanese, Russian, Arabic, and Chinese. However, over the period of 2 years, most of the participants became unavailable for numerous reasons. Fortunately, I was able to be keep in touch with Mark who was not only interested in the research topic, but also was willing to share his personal journey of learning Arabic with me.

In order to ensure reliability and validity of the study, I employed several forms of triangulation by employing the following strategies (Merriam, 1998): (1) triangulation by collecting multiple sources of data (e-mail interviews with Mark and Mark's Arabic professors, research papers and course syllabus prepared by Mark, Mark's Arabic class observed by the researcher),
(2) a member check by asking Mark to respond to a draft of the paper making sure that my analysis and interpretation is accurate and plausible, and (3) a peer review by asking a colleague, who is in the field, to see whether my interpretations accurately reflect the collected data.

Data Collection
Data were collected over two years from May 2005 through September 2007. I collected from multiple data sources which included interview questions via e-mail, follow-up questions, documents, and reports (teaching statement, syllabus for his Arabic class, summary of Mark’s students’ evaluative feedback, research papers for his independent study, Mark’s class observation). The initial interview questions were sent to Mark via e-mail on May 10, 2005. Since I was interested in how Mark’s personal characteristics as a superior Arabic speaker would match with the ones that Leaver and Atwell (2002) had identified in their study, I incorporated some of the attributes that they outlined in their study for my interview questions (see complete questionnaire in Appendix A). The questions included were: (1) How do you assess your current proficiency in Arabic? (2) Have you had an OPI? How did you score? (3) Have you studied Arabic formally? When? Where? How would you characterize the teaching methodology? (4) Why did you decide to study Arabic? (5) Have you been to the Arabic speaking countries? When? Where? How long did you stay there? In addition, I asked Mark about his relationships with Arabic communities. The questions included were: (1) How do you think that the social practices in your environment constrain or facilitate your access to Arabic? (2) Have you experienced marginalization that limit your opportunities to engage in communication with Arabic-speaking peers, colleagues, and other teachers?

Data Analysis
After identifying Mark’s characteristics as an Arabic language learner, I used the constant comparative method by Glaser and Strauss (1967) by comparing my data with the ones generated by Leaver and Atwell (2002) by identifying similarities and differences between the two sets of data and tried to explain possible sources of differences. Furthermore, in order to understand how Mark positions himself and identifies his multiple identities, I looked for recurring themes or categories from the collected data (Merriam, 1998).

Findings
Through the analysis of the data, it became clear that Mark needs to be described as having at least three separate but closely related identities: Mark as a language learner, Mark as a language instructor, and Mark as a (non) member of the target language community.

Mark as a Language Learner
In this section, I will portray Mark as a language learner based on the data collected, focusing on some personal characteristics, attributes, and possible contributing factors for his success in attaining an advanced level of proficiency in Arabic.

Mark’s journey in learning Arabic started when he entered the Army in 1992 “to pay off his college debt” (e-mail interview 5/1/05), he took the DLAB (Defense Language Aptitude Battery), which sent him to Bravo Company in Monterey, California, which happens to be an Arabic company. Mark studied Arabic both in the United States (e.g., Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Califorina; Goodfellow Air Force Base in San Angelo, Texas) as well as in the target language countries (e.g., American University of Cairo, Egypt; Damascus University in Syria). When asked to self-assess his proficiency, he reported that the last time he tested, which was the summer of 2005, he received a 4.5 or Superior on an OPI in Arabic (e-mail interview, 5/10/05). Mark describes his learning methodology as the Proficiency Method which was incorporated into the curriculum at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) at the Presidio
of Monterey, California. According to Mark, the Proficiency Method is a communicative method which aims to produce learners who are at a minimum 2/2/2 rating in speaking, reading, and listening according to the Interagency Language Roundtable guidelines. The Arabic program at the DLI is 63 weeks long and aims to produce learners at a minimum Level 2 in speaking, reading and listening according to the ACTFL guidelines. In each class, there are ten students who meet five times a week for 6 hours a day. Mark characterizes the DLI program as an intensive learning environment, where the students are allowed to speak in English outside of class without penalties, unlike an immersion environment.

Mark is extremely articulate about his philosophy of language learning. "Thinking in Arabic" by putting himself inside "an Arabic bubble" is at the core of his learning methodology. First, he records authentic materials from Arabic TV programs from Syria, radio broadcasts from Jordan, the Qur'an, poetry (classical and modern), Arabic songs (traditional and modern), news broadcasts, and interviews onto his iPod and listens to them wherever he goes. Second, he "interacts with Arabic speakers speaking memorized lines of script along with the speaking, or in consecutive imitation" wherein he listens to an utterance and then tries to emulate the nuances of the speech act (Mark's paper, 7/2007). Furthermore, Mark describes his average day involving, "waking up and thinking something in English and immediately translating that into Arabic. From that point on I constantly feed my mind with Arabic trying to maintain a constant dialogue of thoughts in Arabic within myself" (paper, 7/2007).

Mark often compares his Arabic learning experience to playing the guitar. According to him, training the mouth muscles to gain fluency, for example, is like increasing his guitar 'chops' or the "rate at which one can simultaneously pick strings while fretting notes" (paper, 7/2007). He explains, "similar to fluency wherein most language learners are interested in speaking faster, most guitarists are interested in increasing their chops. One cannot start playing a riff (a musical phrase) at full speed, just as a language learner cannot begin uttering a sentence at the same rate as a speaker raised in the Arab World" (paper, 7/2007). When I asked Mark to elaborate further his experience in playing guitar and learning Arabic, he chose to elaborate on two areas: discipline and ear training. The following passage reveals the intensity and discipline that went into his playing the guitar:

Discipline is probably the greatest thing that playing and practicing music taught me. Before playing music, I used to not know what I wanted to do in life... One particular moment in my life I set a challenge for myself. I asked myself, "What if I tried as hard as I could at something? How would that thing turn out? I chose playing guitar, and began practicing more hours than I thought anybody else was. If I wasn't playing guitar, I was writing music, if I wasn't writing music, I was ear-training, if I wasn't ear-training, I was arranging." I took music with me, wherever I went, just as I do Arabic. (interview, 9/9/07)

And as for ear training, Mark states:

Of course, after training my ears to distinguish musical tones, distinguishing linguistic tones was a natural extension of this skill. I was able to pinpoint subtle inconsistencies with my Arabic speech, something I continue to work on diligently. In music, I got to the point where I could distinguish the attack of a pick stroke, whether it was an up or down stroke without seeking the player's hand—just by listening. In Arabic, I can distinguish the difference between a person who says hniik and e-hniik which is a dead giveaway to a person
from a different part of Damascus. (interview, 9/9/07)

In fact, one of Mark's Arabic professors also believes that his ability to acquire local dialects is due to his musical talent. He states:

I remember when he [Mark] came back from a four-month stay in Damascus, he spoke in the local dialect of the neighborhood where his residence was. This is a talent even native speakers are unable to match. I myself can't use that local dialect although I grew up in Damascus. (interview, 8/29/07)

In addition to Arabic, Mark reported that he has a reading knowledge of French. When I asked him to compare his learning experience of French with Arabic, he explained, "French, for me, was confusing because it was so similar to English. With 'false friends' and numerous cognates, it was as if I was speaking the same language, but differently. I never felt as if I had a French personality, or a different character has spawned in my psyche." On the other hand, Mark continues, "Arabic is enchanting. It is an intriguing mathematical language highly unlike English. . . When I speak Arabic, I feel different. I relish the challenge that the language offers me. This is part of my personality" (interview, 9/9/07, emphasis added). In his interviews and papers, Mark talked about his trajectory in which his Arabic personality was first activated and how it has become more integrated seven years later:

Learning a new language has been, for me, like awakening within me a new persona, nurturing it, molding it, and allowing it to grow and mature. Conceptually speaking, my Arabic personality only gains experience when active, that is to say when it interacts with myself (dressing my thoughts in Arabic), or with others in a social environment. October 22, 1992 is the day my Arabic persona was activated, when it came into being; it is the first day I began studying Arabic.

In June of 1999, Mark lived in Egypt for a year for the first time. He recounts his experience as follows:

I arrived in Egypt armed with Arabic words and technical jargon, but I had not yet grasped the significance of their cultural, historical, and psychological implications. Because my language antennae were always up, everyday exchanges became an opportunity for me to revise my previous concepts of using Arabic, . . . Arabic was no longer detached language, removed from my identity; rather it became an integral part of who I am—my relationship with the language had forever changed. (paper, 7/2007, emphasis added)

The above statement clearly indicates Mark's "unified bicultural personality," rather than "a dual personality, one per culture" (Leaver & Atwell, 2002, p. 269) which is one of the general characteristics of advanced language learners.

To summarize, Mark is a highly motivated and disciplined language learner. Clearly, he has a high language aptitude which initially placed him in a good position to learn one of the most challenging languages for English speakers. Mark is an autonomous and highly self-regulated language learner who organizes his surroundings to continuously improve his Arabic. He has meta-awareness about his learning process and strategies and can articulate them quite well. This may be due to his years of teaching experience both in U.S. contexts as well as in Arabic-speaking contexts.

**Mark as an Arabic Language Instructor**

In addition to portraying Mark as a language learner, in the following, I will describe the attributes he has as an Arabic instructor, since the two roles seem to impact each other. Mark is an excellent Arabic instructor and his students highly value him as a
teacher. In fact, in the spring of 2007, he received a distinguished teaching award from the university where he has been teaching since 1998. One of his students wrote in his evaluation, "Awesome Energized + Intelligent = Mark Brown." Another student wrote, "Mark is one of the most enthusiastic teachers I've had. It is infectious."

His teaching career began in 1995, and he has taught both basic and intermediate levels. In the United States he taught in the university setting as well as in immersion settings such as at a summer program at Middlebury College in Vermont. Mark brings dual perspectives as a student and instructor into his teaching. He says, "the measure of a good teacher is not how much knowledge he has in his area of specialization; rather it is how much knowledge he is able to impart to his learners. It is for this reason I continually strive to make my classes learning-centered, and not teaching centered" (Mark's teaching statements, 2/2007). He describes beautifully the relationship between a beginning language learner and the instructor:

Metaphorically speaking the beginning language learner is like a person closely standing next to an infinite mosaic. The student does not realize the magnitude of the mosaic, due to his proximity to it. With every word, phrase, or idea that the student learns in the second language, he takes a step back, increasing his field of vision. Once the student has stepped a sufficient distance from the mosaic, he will be able to find commonalities and form relationships between once seemingly distinct bits (tiles) of information. My role as a language instructor is to effectively widen the student's scope of the mosaic by prematurely elucidating these relationships, enhancing student recognition of the commonalities that exist among Arabic shapes (i.e. the different measures, patterns, and forms that Arabic words take). (teaching statement, 2/2007, emphasis added)

There are two things that Mark seems to value in his teaching. First, he believes firmly in the power of community learning as he said, "if everyone is working to make those around him better, the class ambience becomes one conducive for learning and teaching" (Mark's instructional materials). Second, he believes that daily homework is an opportunity for the students and the instructor to be "in constant contact with the language—thinking and functioning in Arabic." Apparently, his students have responded positively because he reports that "since I have implemented the daily submission system, not even one student has complained, in fact, students offer unsolicited positive feedback concerning completing homework in this fashion."

In summary, Mark clearly sees a symbiotic relationship between teaching and learning. By teaching, he feels that he is growing not only as a teacher but also as a learner of Arabic. In his words, "it is the successful teacher who not only challenges his students to grow, but challenges himself to grow with them which I attempt to do along the path on a journey of learning the Arabic language" (teaching statement, 2/2007).

Thus far, I looked at Mark as an individual learner and a teacher of Arabic. In the following section, I will discuss how Mark's surrounding sociocultural factors either facilitated or hindered him in gaining access to an Arabic-speaking community.

Mark as a (non)Member of the Arabic Community

What are some social practices of a given community which facilitated and hindered an advanced Arabic speaker's access to Arabic? In his interview, Mark mentions creating an Arabic bubble in which he immerses himself all day long. To explain this almost obsession to be surrounded by the Arabic bubble, Mark stated, "I have to create opportunities to interact with Arabic, because few indigenous opportunities exist in my current environment. Learning Arabic would be easier if I married an Arabic woman,
and converted to Islam—neither of which I did” (interview, 9/9/70, emphasis added). He continued, “Being married to someone who does not really have an interest in Arabic prevents me from involving myself further with the Arab community here in X city. My wife seems to believe that visiting my Arab friends is somehow part of my job, or related to my job in that I am using the visit as a linguistic opportunity.” So, Mark made sure to meet and spend some time with “just about every Arab” who goes to the same university as he does (interview, 9/9/07). In short, there are some personal factors which might hinder his easy access to the target language communities, yet he is not discouraged from brining the “Arabic world” to him in every possible way.

How does Mark negotiate his identity as a nonnative speaker vis-à-vis an Arabic speaking community? He has encountered both positive and negative reactions from the native speakers of Arabic. Mark feels that it is a huge complement when “Arabs will stare at me, confused. Simply stare and then say, ‘this just doesn’t add up. I see your face and features, but you tongue is Arabic.’” But at the same time, Mark is aware of the backhanded complement when the native speakers tell him, “Oh my God! How can you speak so well! Look at him and how he can speak better than we can!” What this really means is, “You will never know the language. It is ours. You are the other’ an ‘outsider,’ and your hair and eye color will always give you away” (interview, 9/9/07). Furthermore, being a nonnative speaker of Arabic, Mark has experienced marginalization which limited his opportunities to engage in communication with Arabic speaking peers and colleagues. He explains,

There are many Arabs who would rather I not exist, I feel. They would prefer that I did not speak Arabic and did not have access to their religious text and culture to the extent that I do. These types of people are not few. They tend to pigeonhole me immediately and constantly make light of my Arabic. They will state, “you are mixing your dialects all together. I cannot make sense of it.” This is a falsehood. I could not be more in tune with the separation of my Egyptian and Syrian dialects. I know when I mix them and do it for effect, just like they do. (interview, 9/9/07)

In addition, Mark talks about how his authority as an Arabic teacher is challenged by other Arabic teaching assistants who are native speakers.

One TA that I am working with really distrusts me. He constantly ridicules my Arabic. He speaks as if he were the spokesperson for Arabic: “We wouldn’t say it that way. We would say . . .” I rarely say anything in Arabic that I haven’t heard on a tape from a mini-series, or a sit-com. The exact sentence I used on that particular occasion was word-for-word from a TV script—verbatim. (interview, 9/9/07)

His identity as a nonnative Arabic speaker has been challenged not only by his native speaking colleagues but also sometimes by his students. Mark expresses his frustration as follows:

There are those students who will come up to me and ask, “how would a native say that? I know that you speak with an accent, I can hear it. How would a native say that?” Alright, if I can fool natives into thinking that I am an Arab at social gathering that last for hours, how is it that this student whose hours of language contact with Arabic probably amount to less than 100, is able to discern my ‘accent?’ (interview, 9/9/07)

Negotiating his membership as legitimate in the Arabic community has not been always easy for Mark. Yet, he is convinced that his role as an advanced Arabic speaker and teacher can help Westerners understand Islam and Middle Eastern culture. He says, “I want to be able to allow non-native speakers of Arabic to be able to form their opinions about politics instead of having
TABLE 1

Comparison Between Mark and L & A’s Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants’ Characteristics</th>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Participants in L &amp; A’s Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>39 years old</td>
<td>30–50 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning method</td>
<td>Proficiency method (a communicative method)</td>
<td>Noncommunicative methods (all the participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived in the TL countries</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (all the participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal ties to the TL</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (e.g., spouse, very close to friends)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>countries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual/multilingual family</td>
<td>No, monolingual family</td>
<td>Yes (more than two-thirds of the participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>background</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current working positions</td>
<td>Graduate teaching associate in Arabic</td>
<td>Nearly all the participants (e.g., translator, interpreter, foreign language educator)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>related to the TL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other L2s studied</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Yes (all the participants) studied more than one foreign language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: L & A, Leaver & Atwell; TL, target language.

preconceived notions of policy presented to them by the Western media . . . ” (interview, 9/9/07). Mark may be on the periphery of the Arabic community; however, Mark positions himself as a legitimate member of the Arabic teaching community and he is deeply invested in it as he shares his future goals: “I want to be a successful instructor of Arabic. I aspire to write articles, books, and computer programs to encourage others to follow my path and learn about this fascinating region and people” (interview, May 10, 2005).

Discussion

Some findings in the present study confirm the findings from the earlier studies on good and advanced language learners (Leaver & Atwell, 2002; Naiman et al., 1978; Norton & Toovey, 2001), while it also presents new dimensions of a good language learner of a less commonly taught language. How does Mark’s general characteristics as a language learner compare with the advanced language learners in Leaver and Atwell’s (2003) study? Table 1 summarizes Mark and the participants in Leaver and Atwell’s study in terms of their general characteristics.

As shown in Table 1, Mark shares four out of seven (approximately 60%) general characteristics identified by Leaver and Atwell. Mark is in his late 30s as all the participants in Leaver and Atwell’s study were adults; most of them were over the age of 40. In terms of the teaching method, Mark learned Arabic using the Proficiency Method, a communicative method. Interestingly, none of Leaver and Atwell’s participants was taught with communicative methods. However, all of them lived and acquired the target language and culture in context as Mark did. As mentioned before, Mark reported that he had studied Arabic in countries such as Egypt and Syria. Almost all have positions that require use of their language skills in some way (e.g., teacher, curriculum developer, proficiency tester, etc.); Mark teaches Arabic as a teaching assistant. Unlike the majority of the participants in the study by Leaver and Atwell (2002), however, Mark comes from a monolingual family and does not have personal ties to Arab countries. As I discussed before, this lack of personal ties has made it necessary for Mark to create an “Arabic bubble” in which he immerses
himself daily. Indeed, his general profile as an advanced Arabic speaker matched to a certain degree with the ones revealed by Leaver and Atwell's study (2002). The present study, however, also revealed some complex sociocultural dimensions that are often overlooked in earlier studies. Being white, blonde, and blue eyed, and married to a non-Arab woman has limited his access to the target language community. Being a nonnative speaker of Arabic, Mark has also encountered resistance from some students and other teaching assistants, who are native speakers of Arabic. Yet, what is remarkable about Mark is his perseverance and commitment to bringing the Arabic world to him by creating “Arabic bubbles” in every possible situation. The prolonged engagement with Mark over two years revealed the strategies that Mark has learned to navigate his multiple identities successfully vis-à-vis his students and his colleagues by resisting ascribed identities (Palmer, 2006).

In addition, as Norton and Toohey discussed in their study (2001), “community or extracommunity allies” (p. 317) helped two good language learners gain access to social networks of their communities, for Mark, his Arabic professors were the community allies, who helped him gain access to the social networks of Arabic teaching community. They recognized his passion for Arabic and his talent for teaching. Through their help, Mark was invited to teach in the United States and abroad, and to contribute as a second author for an Arabic textbook. All these efforts have contributed to his future goal of becoming a successful language educator in Arabic.

**Conclusions**

As the enrollment in Arabic in the United States increases, language educators and researchers become increasingly interested in knowing why some students are able to achieve a high level of proficiency in Arabic while some students drop out after one semester. The existing literature indicates that little is known about these Arabic learners (e.g., Husseiniali, 2006) or advanced language learners (Leaver & Shekhtman, 2002). Using the frameworks developed by the previous studies of good and advanced language learners (Leaver & Atwell, 2002; Naiman et al., 1978; Norton & Toohey, 2001), the present study explored an American student's 13-year journey of learning Arabic. The study revealed that learning a second or foreign language is not merely a linguistic endeavor, but rather, it involves other factors such as a learner's multiple identities and access to social networks of target language communities. As shown in Mark's case, if one does not have close personal ties to target language countries, then it is not easy to travel there frequently or have easy access to target language communities at home. It therefore necessitates a language learner to create an environment which enhances current proficiency in a given situation. Fortunately, in recent years, language educators (Byrnes, 2006; Byrnes et al., 2005; Leaver & Shekhtman, 2002) have increasingly become aware of issues related to advanced language learners and have begun to explore innovative approaches to accommodate specific needs of advanced language learners. More research needs to be conducted to examine the efficacy of these approaches with a wide variety of languages and learners.

The present study also revealed that a learner's access to the target language communities can be greatly enhanced and facilitated by allies or mentors. They play an important role in helping a learner to negotiate his/her identity from stigmatized identities to empowered identities vis-à-vis a target language community (Norton & Toohey, 2002). As discussed before, Mark's two Arabic professors created a legitimate space for him in the Arabic teaching community by inviting him to teach Arabic classes at the university. In addition, one of the professors who authored an Arabic textbook invited Mark to be a co-author in the second edition. In order for language programs to produce more advanced language learners, a systematic approach to mentoring them, either with more advanced language learners or with educated native speakers, needs to occur. It contributes not only to their improved linguistic compe-
tence, but also to their sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence.

Finally, as Leaver and Atwell maintain (2002), we need to hear more stories from advanced language learners like Mark so that we can infuse our pedagogical approaches with their experiences in terms of teaching methods, materials development, syllabus development, and professional development for teachers of commonly as well as less commonly taught languages. Their stories are empowering and convincing to those students who are aspiring to become advanced language learners because they engage them deeply as a whole person.

Acknowledgment
I would like to thank Mark, the participant of my study, for his willingness and enthusiasm to share his story with me. Without his help, I could not have written this article. Special thanks go to Allen Clark and Dr. Alisho for their insightful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts.

Notes
1. There are many places that still, in 2008, consider Arabic to be a LCTL. Some examples are: The Center for Less Commonly Taught Languages, the U.S. Government in the form of the Interagency Language Roundtable, The National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages, UCLA. Special thanks go to Allen Clark and Dr. Alisho for their insightful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts.

2. However, there are researchers (e.g., Alisho, 1997; Naiman et al., 1978; Stevick, 1989) who contend that self reports data provide valuable and/or reliable information.

References


### APPENDIX A

**Interview Questions for Advanced Language Learners of Less Commonly Taught Languages**

1. How do you assess your current proficiency in the target language (TL)?
2. Have you had an OPI? When? How did you score?
3. Have you studied the TL formally? When? Where? How would you characterize the teaching methodology?
4. Why did you decide to study the TL? What was the motivation behind that?
5. Have you been to the TL speaking country or countries? When? Where? How long did you stay?
6. Have you taught the TL? Where? When? What level? For how long? What is your overall teaching philosophy or approach?
7. Do you know other L2s? What is your proficiency in each of them?
8. What is the hardest part of learning the TL? (e.g., grammar, pronunciation, pragmatics, socio-cultural competence, etc.)
9. Based on your experience, what do you think are important factors for learning a less commonly taught languages?
10. What are your goals for learning the TL? (professional reasons, educational, social, or personal)
11. What are your future goals with regards to the TL? (I would like to able to do . . .)
12. How much time in average do you use the TL presently? In what capacity and/or context?
13. What are some recurring problems you have encountered in the TL? What strategies have you used to solve them?
14. Do you feel that you family background has influenced in selecting the TL to study? How so?
15. Please describe native speakers’ attitudes toward you when you speak the TL.
16. Do you have suggestions for encouraging more American students to learn less commonly taught languages?