“They Didn’t Know What to Do With Me”: Transitioning from the High School Arabic Classroom to College Foreign Language Study

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Abstract

Despite substantial efforts to develop foreign language learning pipelines, little is known about students’ experiences moving between levels of education. This is particularly true for less commonly taught languages, where pre-tertiary learning is considered crucial for graduating students at higher levels of proficiency. This qualitative case study examines how four L2 learners of Arabic transition from their high school classrooms to university programs. Adopting a grounded theory approach to analyze survey and focus group data, three key themes emerge: initial (dis)orientation in the tertiary setting, classroom (dis)harmony as students navigate new norms, and retrospective appreciation for their high school learning environments. The results illustrate that university programs seem to lack appropriate measures to accommodate pipeline learners. Likewise, high school programs are not doing enough to familiarize students with the learning opportunities ahead. The findings have implications for programs, teachers, and students on both sides of these periods of transition.

The ACTFL World-Readiness standards state that a top goal for foreign language instructors is to create “lifelong learners” (Cutshall, 2012). This goal seems particularly critical in a time of falling enrollment and budget cuts in foreign language programs (A. Friedman, 2015). One strategy to stem the tide is to introduce foreign language study at earlier stages in life (Fox et al., 2019). This is particularly true for less commonly taught languages (LCTLs), where millions of dollars have been invested by the United States government in K-16 critical language
education (U.S. Department of Education, 2008) through domestic programs such as the National Security Agency’s STARTALK (STARTALK, n.d.) and study abroad programs like U.S. Department of State’s National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y, n.d.). These programs not only aim to jump start critical language education, but to furthermore give students the amount of exposure they need to realistically reach advanced levels of proficiency by the time they enter university (Carroll, 1967; Isbell et al., 2019; c.f. Munoz, 2014).

Despite the massive quantities of time and funding invested in early foreign language education, little is known about the extent to which pre-tertiary LCTL pipelines actually set students up for success in their subsequent language programs. The current qualitative case study attempts to address this gap by examining the experiences of students learning Arabic as a second language across multiple stages and institutions. Utilizing a grounded theory approach to analyzing survey and focus group data, it explores how four students of Arabic make sense of their transition from high school to college-level foreign language studies.

**Students’ Perceptions Across Points of Transition**

As Harnisch and Taylor-Murison have pointed out, “too often points of transition become exit points” from foreign language study (2010). Leaving one educational setting for another can interrupt a student’s focus, making it all the easier to drop their foreign language studies and or be distracted by other opportunities. Although curricular articulation is often a stated goal within language programs (e.g. Davin et al., 2014), few studies have addressed students’ experiences as they navigate between educational settings. The bulk of research studying foreign language learning across these periods of transition have focused on attitudes and motivation of students in the United Kingdom (Bavendiek, 2008; Busse & Walter, 2013; Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011) and in the United States (Jahner, 2012; Moore, 2005; Pratt, 2010). These studies span a variety of ages from middle school all the way through the start of university education.

Harnisch, Sargeant, and Winter (2011) looked at the transition from secondary education (ages 14-16) to sixth form (ages 16-18) in the United Kingdom. Through an initial survey, and follow-up focus groups, the authors found that students had overall enjoyed their language learning experiences in secondary school, listing games, speaking and writing activities, and “liking the teacher” as their main reasons (Harnisch et al., 2011, p. 164). Around half of the students reported that the transition from secondary education to sixth form was difficult, citing the increased emphasis on grammar as a major factor. Students also suggested that more focused
grammar instructions at the secondary level would have eased the transition to sixth form. Thus, it seems that these sixth form students had a positive emotional connection to their earlier language learning experiences, and felt unprepared for the switch in activity types and foci in their new educational setting.

Pratt (2016) investigated high school students as they looked ahead to college-level study. In seeking to explain low university enrollments in French courses, Pratt surveyed 220 high school students of French in west Texas (see Pratt [2010] for similar findings with students of Spanish). Of the students interviewed, 96% indicated that they were planning on going to college, and yet only 46% intended to continue studying French in college. Pratt’s survey focused primarily on motivation: when deciding whether or not to continue studying French in college, students were mainly driven by a desire to get good grades, participate in enjoyable classroom activities, and improve their language skills. At the bottom of their priority list was “relevance to other academic subjects,” “relevance to my major”, and “encouragement of (grand)parents” (Pratt, 2016, p. 4). Pratt surmised that high school students are mainly extrinsically motivated: they will continue studying French if they can see tangible benefits, both educational and emotional, down the road. Although age and context of the students in Pratt (2016) differ substantially from those in Harnisch et al. (2011), both groups seem to value positive classroom experiences of their previous foreign language educational settings.

Finally, Peng (2011) explored how one L1 Chinese student’s beliefs about teaching and learning changed during his first year in a college-level English language course. The transition from high school to college foreign language learning is described as moving from a teacher-centered, lecture-based classroom to one which emphasizes the importance of oral communication (Peng, 2011). Peng’ focal student was initially enthusiastic about emphasis on oral English practice. As the year progressed, however, the intensive focus on conversation was increasingly perceived as a burdensome academic task. Peng attributes this change to a growing mismatch between the focal student’s new environment and his own beliefs about language learning: once oral communication was no longer novel, it was seen as a way to hold students’ attention but not necessarily foster actual learning. The student participated in communicative language activities but did not necessarily view them as useful or important compared to his high school studies. The students in both Peng (2011) and Harnisch et al. (2011) note the stark contrast in language classroom foci as they move between levels of school. This sharp change is
disruptive in the sense that students either do not feel prepared for it (as with the sixth form students) or do not believe in it (as with the L1 Chinese student). Peng’s (2011) participant likewise harbors a similar extrinsic motivation to the students in Pratt (2016): both place importance on the extent to which they believe they will benefit from engagement in the language classroom.

Although the three studies covered in this section span a broad range of ages and contexts, they shed light on the general issues that students may face as they make sense of their language learning journey across educational settings: having a positive emotional connection to the language classroom seems to motivate continued study. However, this connection alone is not sufficient if students do not believe in the efficacy and benefits of what they are learning in the new setting. Finally, a lack of continuity between the skills emphasized in subsequent educational settings can leave students feeling unprepared as they transition to the next stage. The next section illustrates how this lack of continuity may manifest itself in an Arabic language learning context.

**Arabic-Specific Issues**

Although the study of Arabic as a foreign language is growing in popularity, this boom is seen mainly in universities and colleges. According to the Modern Language Association, in 2016 there were 31,560 students of Arabic in US institutions of higher education (down from 35,228 in 2009) (Modern Language Association, 2016).¹ Compare this number to the estimated 3,740 high school students of Arabic in 2017 (American Councils for International Education, 2017). These numbers illustrate that the vast majority of students who study Arabic in college are studying it for the first time, and do not have prior Arabic experience from high school programs. Hence, college programs likely have little incentive to accommodate learners of Arabic who do have prior experience.²

The nature of Arabic itself can also be a unique challenge for learners and teachers alike. Arabic is cited as a highly diglossic language, meaning that native speakers make use of multiple, divergent registers throughout their daily lives (Ferguson, 1959). Register use is not random, but rather follows a fairly strict set of social codes and pragmatic functions (Badawi, 1973). Non-native learners of Arabic are taught that Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is used in formal situations, such as news broadcasts, literature, academic speeches, and religious settings. For all other settings, dialects of Arabic are used (Holes, 2004; Younes, 2015). Arabic dialects
are extremely diverse, and are not necessarily mutually intelligible even for native speakers (S’hiri, 2002). Despite the obvious necessity for both registers, most university Arabic programs in the United States focus primarily on MSA at the expense of teaching any dialect (Hashem-Aramouni, 2011; Ryding, 2013). As will become apparent in the current study, this tertiary curricular choice may be at odds with the register and language functions to which high school students of Arabic are exposed.

The Current Study

Unlike the previously discussed studies, which look at specific moments of transition in time as isolated events, the current study asks how students, with the benefit of hindsight, look back on and understand their experiences transitioning from high school to college-level language studies. By exploring this period with students of Arabic, the current study seeks to fill a gap in our understanding of the extent to which LCTL pipelines are successfully supporting learners. This study therefore seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do students who studied Arabic in high school experience the transition to college-level classes?
RQ2: How do these students look back on their high school programs in light of their college programs?

The present study will examine how Arabic L2 learners experience the transition from high school to university-level language classes. It has implications not only for students of foreign languages - LCTLs in particular— who are considering continuing their studies, but furthermore for the very practitioners shaping their educational experiences.

Participants

Participants were recruited by reaching out to fellow high school and college level teachers of Arabic through various professional networks asking for recommendations. From that initial call, 13 participants from three different high school programs completed a survey in the fall of 2017. An anonymized summary of those participants is listed below in Table 1. All 13 survey participants were invited to take part in a follow-up focus group to further discuss their experiences. Two separate hour-long focus groups were conducted, with three participants in
each group. Of those six focus group participants, this study will focus on 4 individuals: Emily, Serena, Katie, and Mei (to ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms for participants and programs will be used through this paper). These four were chosen because their backgrounds were the most representative of survey participants as a whole, and because they provided the richest data during our focus group discussions. The remaining 9 participants’ survey data provided crucial background information during the coding process to frame the experiences of Emily, Serena, Katie, and Mei.

It is important to note that several of these participants are, in fact, former students of the researcher’s. Of the focal participants, Katie was the researcher’s student two years prior to the start of the current study; the transition period she describes below occurred before the researcher had met her. Furthermore, her high school teacher (who also taught Emily) at Fairfield Country School was a former colleague of the researcher’s through the Institute of Arabic. Having taught Arabic in high school summer programs and in college-level academic settings, the researcher has witnessed students on both ends of this transition period (although she has not taught any one student at both levels). The researcher also began studying Arabic in college, so she sympathizes with the unique intricacies of this learning process. Her relationship to Arabic language teaching and learning uniquely positions her to investigate this transition period. As a researcher, however, does she believe it is important to reflexively recognize the role that she undoubtedly play a in creating and interpreting the data presented here (De Costa, 2015).

**Study Design**

The current qualitative study consisted of two parts, based on the design employed by Harnisch et al. (2011): an online survey conducted with Qualtrics survey software (Qualtrics, 2017) and follow-up semi-structured focus groups conducted via Zoom videoconferencing software (Archibald et al., 2019; Zoom, 2017). The online survey comprised 41 questions, both open and close-ended, which were informed by issues covered in the literature review as well as the author’s own experiences working in this area. As the current study is exploratory in nature, the questions were designed to broadly elicit participants’ subjective impressions of this transition period, ranging from their perceived proficiency levels in across language skills to the types of classroom activities and projects they engaged in (see the Appendix for the full list of survey questions). The results of the survey were used to frame the focus group discussions.
Table 1: Participants (focal participants in bold, non-focal participants who took part in focus groups in italics)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>High School Program &amp; years of Arabic study</th>
<th>College Program &amp; Years of Study</th>
<th>Study Abroad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Fairfield Country School *** 4</td>
<td>Holton &amp; Smith ^^^ 0.5</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serena</td>
<td>Bridges to the World * 2</td>
<td>Northwest State University ^ 1</td>
<td>2.5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Fairfield Country School *** 4</td>
<td>Easton University ^^^ 4</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mei</td>
<td>Bridges to the World * 1</td>
<td>Northwest State University ^ 1</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Institute for Arabic ** 3</td>
<td>Southwest State University ^</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Institute for Arabic ** 3</td>
<td>Levantine International University ^ 0.5</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian</td>
<td>Institute for Arabic ** 3 Boston Arts &amp; Sciences *** 3</td>
<td>American Military Academy ^^^ 3</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Bridges to the World * 3</td>
<td>Grafford College ^^^ 2</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethany</td>
<td>Institute for Arabic ** 2</td>
<td>Gloucester University ^^^ 2</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>Bridges to the World * 1</td>
<td>Northwest State ^ 2</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talia</td>
<td>Pelham Day Academy *** 4</td>
<td>Easton University ^ 1.5</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Institute for Arabic ** 1</td>
<td>Trent University ^^^ 3.5</td>
<td>3.5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Institute for Arabic ** 2</td>
<td>Wilbraham College ^^^ 4</td>
<td>4 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * after school program, ** summer program, *** high school, ^ public university, ^^ private university, ^^^ liberal arts college, ^^^^ US military service academy
The goal of the focus group was to foster conversation between participants. As noted by Prior (2018), focus groups create spaces for participating members to discuss and debate their experiences, ultimately providing a more “holistic picture of a group or community’s (shared and divergent) perspectives” (p. 14). These spaces are particularly important for participants in the current study, as these students are often the only ones in their entire university language program who came to campus with some formal Arabic exposure. Anticipating that it may be difficult to foster conversation between strangers, the same set of two prompts were sent out to all focus participants ahead of time (see the Appendix). Apart from using those prompts to open and close the focus group sessions, the researcher’s role as facilitator was mainly limited to clarification requests and ensuring that all participants had the opportunity to weigh in.

By coincidence, each focus group had two members who had known one another from their high school Arabic programs. The researcher did not attempt to address these groupings, as they turned out to organically foster a rich conversational space. Participants with previous connections seemed to already be comfortable speaking with one another, and that comfort set the affective tone for others in the focus group to freely share as well. These grouping may have affected the nature of what was discussed. In the most negative light, the previous connections between some members may have subtly pressured them to come to a consensus (although evidence of such pressure was not found during the interviews nor in reviewing the transcripts). On the other hand, these grouping also served as a type of internal triangulation within the focus group: those with a shared background often corroborated one another’s experiences as a part of the conversation. When triangulation wasn’t achieved through the survey and questionnaire data alone, publicly available information on program and student websites were analyzed.

Participants who took part in both the questionnaire and follow-up focus group were compensated with the Arabic-language dictionary smart phone application “Lughatuna”, valued at $1.99 (Abouzahr, 2017).

Analysis

As the current study is exploratory rather than confirmatory, data were analyzed using an abbreviated grounded theory approach with a constructivist orientation (Charmaz, 2017; D. A. Friedman, 2012). Focus group interviews were listened to several times over during the transcription phase, which served to familiarize the researcher with the content. Transcriptions from the focus groups were first coded openly to allow for the emergence of categories. Given
the researcher’s previous familiarity with some of the study’s participants, overt identifying markers were first removed from the data during initial coding to limit a potential source of interpretation bias. From the initial open coding phase, 9 categories were identified. Coding then proceeded axially across survey responses. Axial coding, along with memo writing, allowed for patterns to emerge across data sources. Finally, identifying markers were reinserted to selectively code the data set across cases. As a result of this selective coding process, 3 major themes were identified: initial (dis)orientation, classroom (dis)harmony, and retrospective appreciation.

Findings

In this section, findings are presented in two parts. The first part narrates focal participants’ periods of transition in order to contextualize their experiences. This is achieved by weaving together background information, collected from the survey data, with quotes from the focus group sessions. The second part describes how their experiences can be understood in terms of the three major themes which emerged from the qualitative analyses.

Contextualizing the Focal Participants

Katie: “I felt guilty being in class”

At the time of the study, Katie was in her senior year of her undergraduate education. Katie had started off her Arabic studies as a high school freshman at Fairfield Country School. Her teacher maintained a fun classroom environment in which they learned Arabic through singing, dancing, and acting. Of course, there were tests and reading activities, but the class generally encouraged interactive learning with an emphasis on listening and speaking. Katie recalls class being conducted almost entirely in Arabic, and that even she and her classmates spoke with each other in Arabic three-quarters of the time. While they learned some Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the conversational emphasis of the class meant that the majority of the learning focused on Levantine Colloquial Arabic (LCA).

As an incoming freshman at the prestigious Easton University, Katie was excited about the opportunity to continue studying Arabic. She was told to come speak with the program director about placement options. The placement, however, was a simpler process than she had anticipated. She recalls, “my placement exam was going into [the program director’s] office, him opening up a textbook, and being like ‘read this.’” After a few minutes of reading, he told her she should go to Elementary Arabic. In the Elementary class, she could tell right away that she
was more advanced than the students around her. Her teacher encouraged her to try the Intermediate class, but when she went there she found the grammar to be over her head. Plus, she knew she wanted to take Arabic for all four years of college, and she was worried that if she started in the Intermediate class, she would run out of courses to take. She ended up staying in Elementary Arabic, with a teacher who she described as “very nice and sweet, but tended to be a pushover” who spoke in English 40% of the time. To this day, Katie isn’t sure if staying in Elementary Arabic was the right decision for her:

I think, in retrospect, I wish I had just taken intermediate Arabic because I could have - I kind of had the choice, even after [the program director] said, “just go to elementary,” because I know my teacher didn't want me in the class. Not that they didn't want me, it was that I felt guilty being in the class, taking these exams [where] basically I already knew everything (Excerpt 1 – focus group session)

Katie was uncomfortable with her position in the class and unsure of her placement. Given her familiarity with the materials, Katie ended up informally tutoring many of her classmates in her Elementary Arabic class. She used the class as an opportunity to “really cement everything in my brain.” Luckily, the Easton Program focuses on a mixture of MSA and LCA, so Kate was able to maintain her conversational fluency. Katie is now a senior in college, and has continued studying Arabic all four years.

Emily: “They just didn’t think I knew anything”

Emily was a classmate of Katie’s at Fairfield Country School, where she also studied Arabic for all four years of high school. At the time that the present study was conducted, Emily was in her senior year of college. In addition to the activities mentioned above, she enjoyed her high school teacher’s emphasis on creative activities like class-made board games and song-writing activities. She recalls that the teacher would ask the students what they wanted to learn, and then would center the curriculum around that topic. During a unit on animals, students ended up composing a song and then creating a music video based on their lyrics. To this day, Emily still catches herself singing her high school songs out loud. High school Arabic was fun, but nonetheless rigorous. Emily explained that Arabic “was my favorite and my hardest class. I also worked the hardest for it.” She did not mind working hard, because she truly loved the materials
and wanted to pursue Arabic further.

College was a completely different scenario for Emily. She was accepted to Holton & Smith, a well-known liberal arts school with dedicated language-focused houses for students. She signed up for the placement exam, which was conducted online and taken over the summer. The exam was entirely in MSA, so Emily felt her LCA skills from high school were of little use. The exam set-up was, in her words, “really bad.” She placed into Arabic 201, but because she had taken its equivalent in high school she was encouraged to register for 301. In Arabic 301, Emily was thrown in with all upperclassman who only understood MSA. Class was very difficult for her:

I didn't talk very much, especially in that one week of 301. I think they thought that I actually didn't know any Arabic, they were like, “who is this freshman who is just here?” because I would get really nervous. This doesn't normally happen to me. I would get really nervous, and stutter and feel awkward . . . this one specific unit . . . I think we were talking about “my major and my job prospects.” I didn't know how to talk about my major in college because that was not in my vocabulary list. They just didn't think I knew anything (Excerpt 2 – focus group session)

Her college classroom activities were incorrectly based on the assumption that everybody had the same background, including a shared vocabulary. These types of activities caused Emily to feel left out and undervalued. She sat in on Arabic 201 as well, but eventually dropped Arabic entirely out of frustration with the program. It took her a year to figure out what she wanted, a period she describes with a sense of loss: “I was sad for a whole year about Arabic.” In the spring semester of her sophomore year Emily tried to register for Arabic 102. Because she had taken elementary Arabic in high school, Emily had to petition to take the course at Holton & Smith. She describes this period as “a nightmare . . . because nobody knew what to do with me.” Emily eventually dropped Arabic entirely, although she still visits the Arabic language house and tries to speak Arabic whenever she can.

Serena: “With college I’m sure I learned something . . . I must have”

Unlike Katie and Emily, Serena’s high school Arabic studies took place not in her school, but at a district-wide after school program called “Bridges to the World” where she studied for
two years. Bridges used the well-known textbook Al-Kitaab (Brustad et al., 2011), but minimally according to Serena. She remembers a bigger emphasis on learning about Arabic culture through songs, skits, and art projects. Perhaps even more importantly, she remembers that testing was framed in a positive way for students: “The [Bridges] teachers were always saying, you know, “This is more to track your progress, to see if we taught you well.” As a result, the curriculum felt more oriented towards gaining fluency in the language than it was towards earning a number for a grade.

When she matriculated to Northwest State University, she hadn’t thought much about what she wanted to study and didn’t realize that there was an Arabic program. By coincidence, on the third day of classes she ran into a friend from Bridges. The friend was going to Arabic 101, which surprised Serena: “I was just like, ‘oh my god, there’s Arabic at NSU? What is this?’” Serena was aware of Northwest State’s strict policies regarding language classes: if you missed more than three days at the start of the quarter, you would need to either test into that class or wait until the following quarter. So she decided to take a chance: “I was like, ‘you know what? I’m not going to think about this!”

Given that the materials were far below her proficiency level, Serena found the Arabic course content to be fairly easy. What was not easy, however, was watching her teacher try to navigate the different language abilities in the classroom. Serena recalled a lot of tension between the teacher, Professor Johnson, and students with some background in Arabic, mainly heritage speakers that spoke a dialect but also some students who had studied Arabic in high school programs. Her teacher, rather than recognizing the diversity of language use in the classroom, insisted that her version of Arabic was the only correct way to practice the language. Serena dropped Arabic at the end of the year to pursue other interests.

After a few years, however, Serena found herself missing the language and so she decided to sign up for a study abroad program in Lebanon. Although she was a college student, she found that her study abroad experience was more similar to the learning she had gained in high school than it was to anything she had experienced in the college classroom:

I would say the way my Arabic went, in high school with Bridges to the World, it went from zero to be somewhat beginner conversational, that kind of jump. With college I'm sure I learned something . . . I must have. I don't think it quite stayed the same, but I don't
think it had that same learning curve that I did throughout high school . . . and then with Lebanon it kind of shot up again. I mean, you know, it was immersion, but within those two months it was a very similar learning curve to what I was experiencing with Bridges (Excerpt 3 – focus group session)

Compared to her high school years and study abroad program, Serena felt she didn’t learn a lot in the college classroom. During the focus group, Serena characterized her college Arabic program as non-immersive relative to her high school program. She explained: “In terms of forming relationships abroad, I think that was something that Bridges to the World prepared for more than college.” College-level Arabic at Northwest State simply lacked the cultural and communicative focus Serena had benefitted from and enjoyed so much during her high school years. Serena did not continue studying Arabic after her study abroad program in Lebanon, although she did to on to major in linguistics. She graduated from college last year and is working in an unrelated field.

**Mei: “Once I stepped into the classroom that I was placed into, it made more sense”**

Mei was also a student in Bridges to the World with Serena. Like Serena, she too matriculated to Northwest State University after high school. Mei enjoyed the laid-back atmosphere of Bridges, but in retrospective she realizes that “we didn't follow any standard memorization of any vocabulary, so we were sort of a little weak on that.” Still, Mei felt very supported by her Arabic teachers, whom she credits for encouraging her to continue her studies in college. They recognized her language abilities and suggested that the rigorous pace of college-level Arabic would be more appropriate for her.

At Northwest State, Mei felt confident enough in her Arabic skills that she decided it was worth taking the placement exam. The exam was an online cloze test with high level vocabulary taken from newspaper articles. The test was difficult for Mei: “I had no idea what I was doing, basically the whole duration of the placement test. I feel like it was standardized in a way that didn't really reflect the Arabic I had at that time.” Mei tested into Arabic 102, passing out of an entire quarter. Despite the mismatch between her high school Arabic skills and what was on the placement exam, Mei eventually came to believe that the exam was appropriate:
Once I stepped into the classroom that I was placed into, it (the placement exam) made more sense to me because there were a lot of grammar rules that we didn't touch on back in high school. It was much more standardized, much more, you know, clear and concise in their teaching method, because we had switched to [the] Al-Kitaab curriculum. It all made sense once I was actually in the college classroom. Then, [I] just [started] really humbly learning everything and soaking everything in (Excerpt 4 – focus group session)

Mei respected the structure of the college classroom, and she realized the importance of vocabulary and grammar in language learning. Similar to Serena, however, Mei also noticed that there was little emphasis placed on speaking: “because it wasn't an immersion learning environment my speaking skills and listening skills kind of stagnated at that point after college.” This may be in part because Serena’s Arabic 101 instructor, Professor Johnson, also taught Mei’s Arabic 102 course, and hence the teaching style was similar. These views were partially corroborated through anonymous student reviews on the popular website “Rate My Professors” (Rate My Professors, 2017): out of 8 students of Arabic between 2010-2017, 3 commented on her tendency to not speak Arabic in class, as illustrated by the review in Figure 1:

![Rate My Professors Review](image)

**Figure 1.**

Mei also felt that the college classroom was heavily focused on grades (a view corroborated by another student on “Rate my Professors”). She mourned the fact that “everybody was worrying about GPA instead of the pure enjoyment of learning another language.” In high school, Mei clearly loved studying Arabic for the sake of learning, and regrets that this sentiment was absent in college. Like Serena, Mei only continued studying Arabic for one year at Northwest State University. Unlike Serena, Mei did not end up studying abroad. She graduated
six months prior to the current study with a professional degree and is currently working in an unrelated field.

Theme 1: Initial (Dis)Orientation - “I felt it didn't really do me justice”

This first theme partially answers the first research question: “How do students who studied Arabic in high school experience the transition to college level classes?” All four of the focal participants experienced an initial period of disorientation as they first transitioned from high school to college. For Katie, Emily, and Mei, this disorientation took place in the form of their placement exam experiences. Recall from above that Katie had studied Arabic for four years in high school. Her college placement exam consisted of reading out loud from the textbook for a few minutes, after which she was placed into Elementary Arabic. Katie was uncertain with how she was being measured in the placement exam, and lacked the self-awareness to dispute the results. Part of the reason why Katie did not push for a higher placement was that she did not want to run out of classes. She explained that starting back at Beginning Arabic meant that:

I wouldn't have to worry about all the Arabic electives, because I wasn't sure how many Arabic electives that they would offer. If I had done Intermediate my freshman year, and then Advanced Arabic my sophomore year, would I have enough Arabic for junior and senior year? (Excerpt 5 – focus group session)

As a freshman, Katie was unsure of the course offerings available at Easton University and decided to play it safe. She now recognizes now that there are more than enough advanced-level electives offered on a rotating basis. Looking at Easton’s online course listings, however, it would be admittedly difficult to tell which classes were conducted in Arabic from their titles alone. Katie’s period of orientation was, in fact, a period of disorientation: the goals and metrics of the placement exam were unclear, and she was uncertain about what future options would lie ahead of her if she challenged the placement. I thus characterize this initial entry period into college-level Arabic programs as one of (dis)orientation.

Emily and Mei also experienced an initial sense of disorientation starting with their placement exams. Both sat for more traditional exams which did not match any type of exam or
knowledge base they had experienced before. Holton & Smith’s exam was online, and consisted of what Emily described as “very specific useful things like, how to say ‘12 feet’, ‘12 centimeters,’ I just didn't know the words for it that [but] I could get around in a lot of other situations.” Her description demonstrates that, while she understood the necessity of learning such concrete terms, she also believed that her ability to function in Arabic could not be adequately captured by such a test. Mei describes a similar disconnect between her high school language skills and her college placement exam at Northwest State: “The college placement test was so heavy on vocabulary, it was really heavy on vocabulary that we won't really use in daily life, you know. I felt it didn't really do me justice in that sense.” For both Emily and Mei, their initial contact with their college Arabic programs also constituted a period of (dis)orientation: both were caught off-guard by the nature of the exam, which did not allow for their own language abilities to be acknowledged, let alone measured. As noted in the literature review, a lack of continuity in the activities and skillsets valued by language programs on either side of a transition can be jarring for students (Harnisch et al., 2011; Peng, 2011).

Serena, on the other hand, experienced a different sort of initial (dis)orientation: despite being on a college campus no far from where she grew up and with friends from the Bridges to the World program close by, she did not even realize that Arabic was available at Northwest State University. Thanks to a serendipitous run-in on campus with a former classmate, Serena learned that she could take Arabic. Without time to plan or think ahead, she decided on the spot to follow her classmate to Arabic 101: “I didn’t take a language test coming into it, I just kind of realized, ‘Oh, there's an Arabic class! I'll just go to level 1 because that’s what we're doing!’” Because of Northwest State’s strict attendance policies, Serena’s only option seemed to be starting Arabic all over again despite having studied Arabic for two years in high school. This lack of information, juxtaposed with the sudden imperative to either start right away in Arabic 101 or wait another term, constitutes Serena’s initial period of (dis)orientation.

As is illustrated above, all four focal members were caught off-guard during their initial contact with their college Arabic programs. This (dis)orientation to college-level studies carried consequences for class placement and classroom dynamics, as we will see in the next section. **Theme 2: Classroom (Dis)harmony – “Well this is the way I've always done it, so this is the way you need to do it.”**

The initial (dis)orientation period was characterized by unfamiliarity with placement
exams, course offerings, and programmatic norms. Once the term began, all four focal participants were placed into their respective classes: Katie and Serena back at Beginning Arabic, Mei in Arabic 102 having tested out of the first quarter, and Emily in Arabic 301 with all juniors and seniors. First semester classes were not entirely without its own bumps, however. The focal participants experienced what I refer to here as “classroom (dis)harmony,” the second theme to emerge in response to the initial research question (how students of Arabic experienced this transition period). While becoming members of their new classroom, all four participants experienced certain difficulties adapting to the new environment. For Katie, this difficulty was coming to terms with her placement back in Beginning Arabic. As demonstrated in Excerpt 1 above, Katie felt a sense of guilt being in the same class as true beginning learners and being graded as such. She reconciled her placement by taking on the role of unofficial tutor and helping her classmates out. While Katie appreciated the opportunity that this placement gave her to review her language skills, she believes it also made her transition to college Arabic somewhat difficult. Rather than settling into classes as a student, Katie felt guilty. She coped with her placement by taking on a dual role in the classroom as tutor and student. This emotionally-charged sense of obligation to take on an additional set of responsibilities marks Katie’s period of classroom (dis)harmony.

Serena had also started back over at Arabic 101 in college. Like Katie, her previously acquired language skills played a role in bringing about a period of classroom (dis)harmony for her first academic term. In Serena’s case, however, she was not the only one in the classroom who had had prior exposure to Arabic. Her classroom consisted of heritage learners who spoke a dialect, students with previous language study like herself, and true beginners. Serena described her instructor, Professor Johnson, as a non-native speaker of Arabic who struggled to establish her own authority in the classroom:

It felt a little bit like she was trying to prove that she was better than the native speakers, and that she had the authority to teach them. So I felt it, that tension that was between the native speakers and the teacher. I think [it] trickled into the students who had a little proficient learning, because a lot of the times we would be like, “Oh but we learned like this” or the native speakers would be like, “Oh, but I've always done this with my family.” And Sarah Johnson was very insistent on, “Well this is the way I've always done
it, so this is the way you need to do it.” (Excerpt 6 – focus group session)

Serena’s non-native speaker instructor, heritage speaker classmates, and fellow students with some formal Arabic study seemed to struggle over which registers of Arabic and which dialects would be allowed in the classroom. Thus, for Serena, classroom (dis)harmony came in through the competing blocs that vied for language authority during her first term of college.

Serena and Katie’s experiences of classroom (dis)harmony stemmed from the fact that their language skills were beyond what was covered in Beginning Arabic. Likewise, a mismatch between prior language skills and the language skills condoned in the class was the source of Emily’s classroom (dis)harmony. Emily spent four years studying in high school with a focus on LCA, whereas Holton & Smith only taught the formal MSA. Emily had difficulty communicating with her peers, not only due to the different register but also the lack of shared vocabulary between them. Recall from Excerpt 2 that she worried her classmates thought she didn’t know anything. This worry was so strong that she was unable to speak from sheer anxiety. Emily ended up dropping her class entirely, an experience she described as “really upsetting . . . since I really loved the language.” The (dis)harmony she experienced is on a whole new level: despite her passion for Arabic, the mismatch between her own language skills and those used by her classmates caused her to drop her studies entirely.

Of the four participants, Mei was the only one who did not report a sense of classroom (dis)harmony as she transitioned into her college-studies. This may be due to the fact that she was the only one who seemed to agree with the level she was placed in. Recall from Excerpt 4 that Mei praised the “standardized . . . clear and concise” teaching methods of her college classroom. While it was different from what she was used to in college, she felt that the rigorous focus on grammar and vocabulary were the appropriate tools to help her succeed in her language studies. She explained, “my writing skills and reading skills just drastically improved after Al-Kitaab [a university-level textbook], after college Arabic.” Note the congruity between Mei’s beliefs in successful language learning and her college classroom activities in comparison to the incongruity experienced by the focal participant in Peng (2011): Mei believed that her language skills were appropriately matched and challenged by the practices of her college classroom, so she embraced them accordingly. While her high school teachers had already previous identified her as a student who would thrive in a university environment, it is also possible that Mei’s
placement into an appropriate-level language played a large role in her course satisfaction. Thus, unlike the other three focal participants, whose class placements did not match their high school language skills, Mei did not experience classroom (dis)harmony when she finally started her university studies.

**Theme 3: Retrospective Appreciation – “Language was something that was beautiful and fun and I kind of lost that a little bit in college”**

For all four focal participants, studying Arabic at the university-level provided them with a new perspective on their high school programs. The final theme to emerge is “retrospective appreciation,” which speaks to the second research question (“How do these students look back on their high school programs in light of their college programs?”). For Mei, who truly appreciated the rigor of her college-classroom, this perspective was borne out of the pressure to get good grades. She described the midterms during her first quarter of classes, which the majority of her peers had done poorly on. The students argued with their instructor, Professor Johnson, and threatened to raise their complaints to the department head. Mei explains:

> That created a very, very significant tension between the students and the teacher that almost went to the head of the department. So yeah, it was definitely not a good classroom dynamic, to be that GPA driven. And that's definitely something I personally feel nostalgic for, the immersion Arabic learning environment back in high school, in Bridges to the World (Excerpt 7 – focus group session)

Mei had identified an unhealthy, grade-focused dynamic in her college classroom. She contrasts that dynamic with her high school program, which managed to be rigorous through immersion without putting an undue emphasis on numbers and results. Although she had yearned for more structure in high school, Mei’s college experience allowed her to retrospectively appreciate the low-stakes environment provided by Bridges to the World.

This sentiment was echoed by Emily, who also disliked the narrowed focus on grades in her college classroom at Holton & Smith. She explains:

> The thing I loved most about high school Arabic, and just language in general, which is . . . conversing with other people . . . [in college] it was so limited, and it was so strict
on grammar and writing. He [the professor] didn't even give us feedback on writing, they would just tell me, “oh you, you misspelled this,” and then it was like they never really nurtured the skills that I already had. It was like, “do this, and get this grade.” And it was just not very fun at all (Excerpt 8 – focus group session)

Emily’s high school education fostered in her a sense of pride on being able to function in Arabic and use it as a tool for communication, while in her college professor focused on discrete, grade-oriented concepts like spelling and grammar. In Excerpt 8, Emily offers a clear juxtaposition between a functional concept of language as a means for “conversing with other people,” and a strict, skill-oriented concept of language. Emily is able to retrospectively appreciate not only the communicative focus of her high school classroom, but furthermore the all-encompassing manner in which her high school teacher defined and nurtured her Arabic language abilities.

Despite studying at different high school programs and universities, Serena and Katie both retrospectively appreciated their high school programs for the breadth of activities used to create learning opportunities. In the survey, Katie identified “singing songs” as her favorite activity from high school, and Serena identified “songs” and “learn[ing] about the culture.” Both enjoyed getting to listen to songs and study the lyrics in college, but resented the limited nature of the activity which had been reduced to a vocabulary exercise. Serena describes listening to one of *Umm Kulthum’s* [famous Egyptian singer] songs in her college classroom. The lyrics had been given as a cloze exercise, and yet Serena found herself getting distracted by the song’s sheer musicality. The Bridges Program had used songs not only for vocabulary building, but also to discuss relevant cultural aspects such as the types of instruments used or the hidden cultural references. It made sense that Serena would focus on these features again in college, but as a consequence she would miss the blanked out words entirely. This was frustrating for her:

You know, you get three times to hear the song so you can get in all of the vocab and make sure you’re spelling it right, and it just kind of took the fun out of it for me. I think, with Bridges to the World, language was something that was beautiful and fun and I kind of lost that a little bit in college (Excerpt 8 – focus group session)
In the excerpt above, Serena mourns the fact that her college Arabic class had reduced songs, once a multi-dimensional source of learning in high school, to a spelling and vocabulary exercise. Katie attributes the limited curricular focus to the intensity and breadth of most college programs: “There’s such structured curriculum, it’s hard to go off course and listen to a song. Usually everything actually takes the full 50 minutes.” Her college courses are so focused on covering all the textbook activities that they have no time to explore important cultural concepts not covered in standard curricula. Recall that many of the students in Pratt (2016) were motivated to continue studying foreign languages in college because of the enjoyable classroom activities they had experienced in high school. When these formerly engaging activities are realized in a completely different manner across educational settings, akin to the shift towards grammar-based activities noted by participants in Harnisch et al. (2011), the result can be jarring.

Despite their different learning trajectories from high school through college, all four focal participants developed a sense of retrospective appreciation for their previous programs of study. This occurred whether the participants were satisfied with their classroom focus, as in the case of Mei, or misplaced into the wrong level as in the cases of Emily, Serena, and Katie. It is worth considering how the method of data collection may have influenced participants’ perspectives. For example, during the focus group session both Serena and Mei described Bridges to the World as having placed greater value on communicative competence than the Northwest State program did. On the survey, however, Serena estimated that a larger percentage of classes were conducted in Arabic in college (70%) compared to in high school (65%), and that she and her classmates likewise spoke more to each other in Arabic in college (55% of the time) than in high school (45% of the time). Mei reported equal levels of Arabic spoken by teachers (90%) and spoken with classmates (60%) in both high school and college. Although both narrated in the focus group that their high school program was far more immersive than college, this is not borne out in the survey data. This might be a discrepancy uncovered by data triangulation. It might also, however, be an example of how interviews as data collection are a form of social practice in which multiple realities are constantly being co-constructed. As Serena engages in the process of recollection and listens to her peers and the interviewer in the focus group, her own perceptions of reality cannot help but evolve. This point is mentioned not to discredit Serena’s data, but to acknowledge the nature of reality, “data”, and the practice of interview through a post-positivist lens (Charmaz, 2017).
Discussion

This qualitative study sought to make sense of the experiences of L2 students of Arabic who began their studies in high school and continued them in college. Applying a grounded theory approach to the survey and focus group data, along with support from external web-based resources, three major themes emerged. From the very outset of their university-level Arabic studies, the focal participants in this study initially experienced a type of (dis)orientation. Whether through the opaque measurements of the placement exam or the lack of awareness about language study options, not a single one of these students felt confident about their initial entrance into college-level Arabic studies. Similar to the findings of Harnisch, Sargeant, and Winter (2011), two of the focal participants in this study experienced difficulty with the increased emphasis on grammar in their new academic settings. This marks what is referred to above as classroom (dis)harmony for Emily and Serena. For Katie, classroom (dis)harmony meant taking on the additional role of tutor to her peers. She took this step on her own accord in order to alleviate her own sense of guilt for being in a class that was too easy for her. It is believed that the incorrect language class placements of these three participants largely contributed to this (dis)harmony. Because of her correct language class placement, Mei was not subject to classroom (dis)harmony during her initial term of study. Her language skills were appropriately matched and challenged by the demands of the course.

Finally, in comparing their college classrooms with their high school programs, it becomes clear that the participants in this study all enjoyed learning Arabic for many of the reasons cited in Pratt (2016)’s study of high school students: they had appreciated the diverse classroom activities and the opportunities to expand their language skills both communicatively and through cultural knowledge. Like the focal participant in Peng (2011), these students experienced a mismatch between the what they had considered to be useful classroom foci in high school and what was emphasized in college.

Conclusion

The findings from this study show that the transition from high school language study to college classrooms can be a rocky experience for foreign language students. For those continuing their study of LCTLs, this transition is made all the more difficult given that university programs seem unsure how to appropriately meet their needs and embrace their background experiences.
The disjunctures experienced by the focal participants undermine national efforts to build strong pipelines of language learners who can achieve higher levels of proficiency. While the current study is limited in focus to four main participants, the conclusions illustrated here will be of use to program directors and foreign language instructors both at the high school level and in college settings. From taking the time to properly orient students into their upcoming university programs, to reforming college placement exams along more egalitarian terms, there is much work to be done to build bridges between foreign language programs during these crucial periods of transition.

1 These numbers aggregate enrollment across all types of Arabic listed by the MLA, which include: Algerian Arabic, Arabic, Classical Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, Gulf Arabic, Iraqi Arabic, Levantine Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, Qur’anic Arabic, Sudanese Arabic, and Syrian Arabic.

2 Of equal concern, but outside the scope of this paper, is how university-level programs accommodate heritage learners of a language. See Bale (2010) and Ibrahim and Allam (2006) for further discussion.

3 The word “nostalgic” was used by me in one of the interview prompts (see the Appendix), and may have influenced Mei’s particular word choice here.
References


Bavendiek, U. (2008). *Keeping up the good work: The motivational profiles of students in secondary and higher education*. CILT, the National Centre for Languages and the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies Languages in Higher Education conference: “Transitions and Connections.”
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University Press.


Appendix

The goal of this survey is to learn about your experiences studying Arabic both in high school and in college. We also want to learn about your transition from the high school Arabic classroom to the college-level Arabic classroom.

This survey is completely anonymous. Your answers will not be linked to you or your Arabic teachers. All identifying details given in your answers will be made anonymous when published.

This survey should take you between 15-20 minutes to complete.

Before we begin, please note that this project has two parts.

Part 1 is the survey, which you are kindly taking now.

Part 2 is an invitation to participate in a follow-up focus group to discuss the results of the survey. You will have the chance to see what others said, as well as to offer more of your thoughts.

You will receive a free copy of the "Lughatuna" Arabic language learning app for iOS / Android if you participate in both parts.

1. Would you be interested in participating in the follow-up focus group?
   [ ] Yes
   [ ] No

2. In this section, we would like to get some background information about your Arabic studies. What is the name of the high school where you studied Arabic? What city and state is your school located in?

   (open-ended response)

3. What is the name of the college where you studied (or are currently studying) Arabic? What city and state is your school located in?

   (open-ended response)

4. How many years did you study Arabic in each setting? Click the setting(s) that applies to you, and write the number of years in the box below it.
   [ ] Elementary School [ ]
   [ ] Middle School / Junior High School [ ]
5. At the end of **high school**, what was your estimated Arabic proficiency level (i.e. how good were you in Arabic?). Rate yourself for each skill:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>Beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-Intermediate</td>
<td>Low-Intermediate</td>
<td>Low-Intermediate</td>
<td>Low-Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-Intermediate</td>
<td>High-Intermediate</td>
<td>High-Intermediate</td>
<td>High-Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluent</td>
<td>Fluent</td>
<td>Fluent</td>
<td>Fluent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. At the end of **your first year of college**, what was your estimated Arabic proficiency level (i.e. how good were you in Arabic?). Rate yourself for each skill:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>Beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-Intermediate</td>
<td>Low-Intermediate</td>
<td>Low-Intermediate</td>
<td>Low-Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-Intermediate</td>
<td>High-Intermediate</td>
<td>High-Intermediate</td>
<td>High-Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluent</td>
<td>Fluent</td>
<td>Fluent</td>
<td>Fluent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Have you ever spent more than 3 weeks in an Arabic-speaking country?
   - Yes [ ]
   - No [ ]

*(If participant answered “yes” to #7, then received the following question)*

8. Please list

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) The country you were in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Your reason for being there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) How long you stayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Morocco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Study abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) one month</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(open-ended response)

In this next section, we would like to know more about your Arabic curriculum in high school.
9. In your high school Arabic classroom, how much emphasis was placed on the following skills? Drag the skills to re-order them in order of importance (1 = least important, 6 = most important)

- Grammar
- Reading
- Writing
- Listening
- Speaking
- Culture

10. In your high school classroom, how often did your teacher speak in Arabic versus in English? Write the percent of time spent in each language (the total should add up to 100)

- [ ] % of time spent in English
- [ ] % of time spent in Arabic

11. In your high school classroom, how often did your teacher make you and your classmates speak in Arabic versus in English? Write the percent of time spent in each language (the total should add up to 100)

- [ ] % of time spent in English
- [ ] % of time spent in Arabic

12. In your high school classroom, how often did you and your classmates actually speak with one another in Arabic versus in English? Write the percent of time spent in each language (the total should add up to 100)

- [ ] % of time spent in English
- [ ] % of time spent in Arabic

13. Did you use a textbook in your high school Arabic class? If "yes", then please write the name of the textbook in the box next to the "yes" selection

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

14. What other materials did your high school Arabic teacher use in class?

Ex. songs, newspaper articles

(open-ended response)

15. On an average day, how many hours of homework did you have in your high school Arabic class

(open-ended response)

16. How often did you have to complete major projects in your high school Arabic class? What types of projects were they?

Example: skits, once per semester

(open-ended response)
17. How often did you have exams or tests in your high school Arabic class?  
(open-ended response)

18. What were your favorite activities that you got to do in your high school Arabic classroom?  
(open-ended response)

19. What were your least favorite activities that you had to do in your high school Arabic classroom?  
(open-ended response)

20. In one sentence, how would you describe your high school Arabic teacher’s teaching style in the classroom?  
(open-ended response)

In this next section, we would like to know more about your Arabic curriculum your first year of college.

21. In your first-year college Arabic classroom, how much emphasis was placed on the following skills? Drag the skills to re-order them in order of importance (1 = least important, 6 = most important)
   - Grammar
   - Reading
   - Writing
   - Listening
   - Speaking
   - Culture

22. In your first-year college classroom, how often did your teacher speak in Arabic versus in English? Write the percent of time spent in each language (the total should add up to 100)  
   [ ] % of time spent in English
   [ ] % of time spent in Arabic

23. In your first-year college classroom, how often did your teacher make you and your classmates speak in Arabic versus in English? Write the percent of time spent in each language (the total should add up to 100)  
   [ ] % of time spent in English
   [ ] % of time spent in Arabic
24. In your first-year college classroom, how often did you and your classmates actually speak with one another in Arabic versus in English? Write the percent of time spent in each language (the total should add up to 100)

[ ] % of time spent in English
[ ] % of time spent in Arabic

25. Did you use a textbook in your first-year college Arabic class? If "yes", then please write the name of the textbook in the box next to the "yes" selection

[ ] Yes
[ ] No

26. What other materials did your first-year college Arabic teacher use in class?

Example: songs, newspaper articles

(open-ended response)

27. On an average day, how many hours of homework did you have in your first-year college Arabic class

(open-ended response)

28. How often did you have to complete major projects in your first-year college Arabic class? What types of projects were they?

Example: skits, once per semester

(open-ended response)

29. How often did you have exams or tests in your first-year college Arabic class?

(open-ended response)

30. What were your favorite activities that you got to do in your first-year college Arabic classroom?

(open-ended response)

31. What were your least favorite activities that you had to do in your first-year college Arabic classroom?

(open-ended response)
32. In one sentence, how would you describe your first-year college Arabic teacher’s teaching style in the classroom?

(open-ended response)

33. Which statement best describes your experience transitioning from a high school Arabic classroom to a college-level Arabic classroom?

- [ ] I had no difficulties
- [ ] I had some difficulties
- [ ] I had a lot of difficulties

34. Please explain your answers to the above question about your transition from a high school Arabic classroom to a college level Arabic classroom

(open-ended response)

35. Let’s pretend that you have a good friend who is currently studying Arabic at your former high school. This friend hopes to continue studying Arabic in college, and wants to be as well-prepared as possible. What advice would you offer this friend in terms of:

1) What to expect in the college Arabic classroom
2) What this friend can do now (while still in high school) to start preparing for college-level Arabic

(open-ended response)

In this section, we want to get some general background information about you.

36. What gender do you identify as?

- [ ] Male
- [ ] Female
- [ ] Other
- [ ] Prefer not to say

37. How old are you?

(open-ended response)

38. What is your native language (i.e. what language did you grow up speaking at home?)

- [ ] English
- [ ] Spanish
[ ] Other [ (open-ended response) ]

39. Are you currently a student?
   [ ] Yes
   [ ] No

*(If participant answered “yes” to #39, then received the following question)*
40a What year are you?
   [ ] Undergraduate - 1st year
   [ ] Undergraduate - 2nd year
   [ ] Undergraduate - 3rd year
   [ ] Undergraduate - 4th year
   [ ] Undergraduate 5th year
   [ ] Graduate - MA program
   [ ] Graduate - PhD program
   [ ] Other [ (open-ended response) ]

*(If participant answered “no” to #39, then received the following question)*
40b. Since you are not in school, then
   1) What is your current occupation
   2) What is your highest level of education?
   3) How many years have you been out of school?

*(open-ended response)*

41. Not counting Arabic, what other languages have you studied?
   Example. “French for 4 years in high school
   Example: “Chinese for 3 years in college and study abroad”

*(open-ended response)*
The Role of Particles in Learner Phrasal Verb Knowledge

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Introduction

Phrasal verbs, like many types of formulaic language, present a challenge for learners of English to master. While phrasal verbs are pervasive in the English language, many non-native speakers of English, even those with high proficiency, struggle to understand and produce them fluently (Gardner & Davies, 2007; Garnier & Schmitt, 2016; Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2015; Schmitt & Redwood, 2011; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007; Strong & Boers, 2019). This underuse of phrasal verbs by non-native speakers causes them to sound unnatural, especially in speech (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2015). Many researchers have investigated phrasal verb knowledge, learning, and use by English learners and a variety of causes have been speculated; however, understanding of the underlying causes of this phenomenon is far from conclusive. Some researchers have shown that learners have trouble mastering the multitude of meanings, especially those that are more idiomatic (Gardner & Davies, 2007; Garnier & Schmitt, 2016; and others). Schmitt and Redwood (2011) argued “the opaque and idiomatic nature of some phrasal verbs presents obvious difficulties for learners and these problems are compounded when we take into account the significant number of phrasal verbs that are also polysemous” (p. 174). These factors are possible key factors in making phrasal verbs difficult for learners to master.
Introduction

Phrasal verbs, like many types of formulaic language, present a challenge for learners of English to master. While phrasal verbs are pervasive in the English language, many non-native speakers of English, even those with high proficiency, struggle to understand and produce them fluently (Gardner & Davies, 2007; Garnier & Schmitt, 2016; Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2015; Schmitt & Redwood, 2011; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007; Strong & Boers, 2019). This underuse of phrasal verbs by non-native speakers causes them to sound unnatural, especially in speech (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2015). Many researchers have investigated phrasal verb knowledge, learning, and use by English learners and a variety of causes have been speculated; however, understanding of the underlying causes of this phenomenon is far from conclusive. Some researchers have shown that learners have trouble mastering the multitude of meanings, especially those that are more idiomatic (Gardner & Davies, 2007; Garnier & Schmitt, 2016; and others). Schmitt and Redwood (2011) argued “the opaque and idiomatic nature of some phrasal verbs presents obvious difficulties for learners and these problems are compounded when we take into account the significant number of phrasal verbs that are also polysemous” (p. 174). These factors are possible key factors in making phrasal verbs difficult for learners to master.

Beyond the challenges with mastering the multitude of, oftentimes idiomatic, meanings, a number of researchers have argued that learners simply avoid using phrasal verbs. A line of research, starting with Dagut and Laufer (1985) and replicated numerous times, has shown a discrepancy between learner receptive and productive knowledge, which these researchers have cited as proof of avoidance (see also Abdel Salam El-Dakhs, 2016; Becker, 2010; Gaston, 2004;
Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Liao & Fukuya, 2004; Yildiz, 2016). Additionally, based on the argument from Strong and Boers (2019) and others that learners lack phrasal verb compositional form knowledge, it’s likely that other factors, including particle knowledge and a lack of ability to distinguish between similar phrasal verbs are contributing to learners’ apparent underuse of phrasal verbs.

**Literature Review**

**Phrasal verbs in English**

Phrasal verbs are a specific type of formulaic sequence comprised of “a verb proper and a morphologically invariable particle that function as a single unit lexically and syntactically” (Liao & Fukuya, 2004, p. 73). Formulaic sequences, which comprise a large portion of language, are typically considered to be stored and retrieved as a single unit in memory (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Wray, 2002). While phrasal verbs haven’t been researched as much as some other types of formulaic sequences, a small body of research on phrasal verb processing has shown that native speakers of English, and in many cases, high proficiency learners of English, do actually process phrasal verbs as a single unit, consistent with the processing of other formulaic sequences (Capelle et al., 2010; Conklin & Schmitt, 2008, 2012; Herbay et al., 2018; Schmitt & Underwood, 2004; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007; Siyanova-Chaturia & Pellicer-Sanchez, 2019; Underwood et al., 2004; Tiv et al., 2019). Although not as common as some formulaic sequences, phrasal verbs are a ubiquitous part of English, especially in spoken or less formal registers. According to Gardner and Davies (2007), English speakers encounter about 1 phrasal verb per 150 words of spoken English. Biber et al. (1999) and Liu (2011) put their frequency at 2,000 and 6,000 tokens per million words, respectively. Larsen-Freeman and Celce-Murcia
Wolfe - PHRASAL VERB PARTICLE KNOWLEDGE

(2015) argued that “no one can speak or understand English (at least the informal register) without a knowledge of phrasal verbs” (p. 441), signifying the importance of phrasal verbs in English.

**Learner knowledge of phrasal verbs**

Although phrasal verb use is common among native speakers, it is well-known among researchers that English learners do not produce phrasal verbs at the same frequency as native English speakers. Siyanova and Schmitt (2007) stated that “multi-word verbs (and phrasal language in general) are a tricky element of English, which even highly advanced learners of English may struggle to utilize in a manner congruent to native speakers” (p. 132). Many reasons have been speculated for this discrepancy in use, including lack of learning about phrasal verbs, confusion about when it’s appropriate to use phrasal verbs, L1 interference, simple avoidance, and characteristics of the verbs themselves that make them difficult for learners to master. In terms of characteristics, phrasal verbs possess many features that may confound learner knowledge and use. Phrasal verbs are generally considered non-compositional, in that the meaning of the phrasal verb typically cannot be determined by defining the parts individually (Biber et al., 1999; Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2015). Related to this, they are also polysemous with a few phrasal verbs having 15 or more distinct meanings and the most common phrasal verbs having, on average, 5.6 distinct meanings (Courtney, 1983; Gardner & Davies, 2007). Many, but not all, of these meanings are idiomatic; Gonnerman and Hayes (2005) stated that phrasal verb meanings range from transparent to opaque, while categorize phrasal verbs into three categories: literal, aspectual and figurative. The polysemous and idiomatic, or semantically opaque, nature of some phrasal verbs has been a common topic of research on learner knowledge.
with research finding that learners are unlikely to know all common meanings of phrasal verbs and that many learners show preference for semantically transparent meanings (Blais and Gonnerman, 2013; Gardner & Davies, 2007; Garnier & Schmitt, 2016; Gonnerman & Hayes, 2005; Zhang and Wen, 2019). For example, Garnier and Schmitt (2016) found that Spanish-speaking learners with high-English proficiency knew at least one meaning for about 40% of the 150 phrasal verbs included in their study and only knew all of the common meanings for 20% of those verbs.

Additionally, the compositional form of phrasal verbs, in that a specific verb combines with a specific particle to have a specific meaning, may be a particularly difficult aspect of phrasal verb knowledge to master. Due to the predominantly non-compositional nature of phrasal verbs, the exact combination of verb and particle needed to have the desire meaning is often times not logical and cannot be derived from general knowledge of verb and particle meaning. While the meaning of some phrasal verbs can be logically parsed from the combination of verb and particle, many phrasal verbs have highly idiomatic meanings that bear no logical relationship to the individual parts. Aspectual phrasal verbs, for example fall in the former category, as the specific particles contribute a consistent meaning, while the latter is true of figurative (or opaque) phrasal verbs (Blais and Gonnerman, 2013; Gardner & Davies, 2007; Garnier & Schmitt, 2016; Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2015). Additionally, while the particle plays an important role in the meaning of phrasal verb, in that changing the particle completely changes the meaning of phrasal verbs, many characteristics of particles, especially in relation to their role in phrasal verb meaning, may make particles a confounding factor in mastery of compositional knowledge of phrasal verbs. Particles, by their very nature, are of low salience and thus are
unlikely to be noticed (Ellis & Wulff, 2015). Additionally, the fact that the same verb can be used with multiple particles and that a very small number of particles are used in the most common phrasal verbs may lead to the retrieval of the correct combination for a particular meaning being “highly susceptible to interference” (Herbay et al., 2018, p. 13; Liu, 2011). In Liu’s corpus analysis of phrasal verbs, only 13 different particles were present in the list of the 150 most common phrasal verbs, and 6 base verbs making up nearly one-third of the list, with at least 7, and up to 12, combinations each; many of these verbs also exist with other particles, including others of the 13, outside of the top 150 list. Side (1990) summed up the difficulty that learners may have remembering which particle to use, arguing that learners tend to think of phrasal verbs as being comprised of “a verb and a randomly interchangeable particle” (p. 145).

**The Case for Avoidance**

A number of studies have claimed that learners’ underuse of phrasal verbs constitutes avoidance, especially among learners who have a non-Germanic first language as phrasal verbs are rare outside of Germanic languages (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2015). According to Van Patten and Benati (2015), “Avoidance behavior occurs when L2 learners attempt to avoid using structures in their production that are difficult as a result of (perceived) differences or similarities between their L1 and the target L2” (pp. 96-97). This is definition is congruent with the argument from Dagut & Laufer (1985) that “the phrasal verb is an exemplification of what happens when the learner is faced by a systemic incongruence between LI and L2, i.e., when his or her LI offers him no parallel to the system he is being called on to use in L2” (p. 78). Dagut and Laufer made their claim of avoidance in a study examining Hebrew-speaking English learner receptive and productive knowledge of 15 phrasal verbs that native speakers showed preference
for over single word synonyms. In their study, learners chose phrasal verbs on a multiple-choice task at a much higher rate than they produced phrasal verbs on a translation-prompted fill in the blank task, leading the researchers to conclude that learners were simply avoiding producing phrasal verbs. Dagut and Laufer’s original study has been replicated multiple times with minor adjustments on learners from a variety of language backgrounds, including Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, Norwegian, and Turkish (Abdel Salam El-Dakhs, 2016; Becker, 2010; Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Liao & Fukuya, 2004; Yildiz, 2016). The replications that looked at learners from non-Germanic L1s found similar results to Dagut and Laufer, while the studies that looked at learners who were native speakers of Germanic languages (Dutch and Norwegian) found higher overall use of phrasal verbs as compared to learners from other L1 backgrounds but some inconsistencies in the types of phrasal verbs preferred. Siyanova and Schmitt (2007), whose study also found less preference for phrasal verbs by learners on a task that adapted Dagut and Laufer’s original multiple-choice test to having participants with non-Germanic L1s rank their likelihood of using the phrasal verb or single word verb, argued that “[l]earners with non-Germanic L1s may take a long time to overcome their discomfort with alien multi-word verbs” (p. 132). Additional research has suggested that learners of romance language users, in particular, may be more comfortable using a single-word verb, typically of Latin origin, due to the similarity with their native language (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007). The findings of these studies together suggest that learners who speak languages dissimilar to English may have a harder time learning and using phrasal verbs but do not conclusively prove that learners have good phrasal verb knowledge but are merely avoiding using them.
Spanish-speakers and phrasal verbs

Research has shown that Spanish speakers do not show good knowledge of phrasal verb meanings and suggested that Spanish speakers are likely to avoid using phrasal verbs, possibly due to an expected preference for single word synonyms (Garnier & Schmitt, 2016, Gaston, 2004; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007). However, it is difficult to figure out the exact cause of their apparent difficulties. Garnier and Schmitt’s study, although it used a gap fill task that was similar to Dagut and Laufer’s production task, was focused on meaning knowledge, not phrasal verb knowledge as a whole or a receptive knowledge-productive knowledge gap. Gaston (2004) argued that her study showed avoidance of phrasal verbs by Spanish-speakers; her study used a multiple-choice task that had the same form as the receptive task in Dagut and Laufer (1985) but the productive task was very different as it required participants to translate 5 Spanish verbs into phrasal verbs. Additionally, the results of her productive task showed particle mistakes to be a major factor. This is not entirely unexpected since prepositions do not have a one-to-one equivalency between Spanish and English (Farrell & Farrell, 1995). Particle mistakes could have also been a factor in Garnier and Schmitt as their gap-fill task required learners to fill in both the verb and particle when prompted by the first letter of each word, but they did not report the source of participant wrong answers, just the percentage of current answers in relation to meaning. Thus, it is possible that compositional knowledge could be at play here but clear conclusions about Spanish-speakers knowledge of phrasal verbs cannot be drawn.

Research Questions

The line of research based on Dagut and Lafer (1985) has argued that learners simply avoid using phrasal verbs as they show good receptive knowledge but lack production. Other
researchers have shown that there are a myriad of reasons that could affect learner knowledge, including but not limited to phrasal verb frequency, semantic transparency, learner L1, and confusion about compositional form. Compositional form has received fairly limited attention in experimental research, even though some researchers have suggested that learners may have trouble remembering the exact combination of verb and particle needed to convey a specific meaning and the particle errors may be a significant factor. As the research that resulted in arguments of avoidance did not account for compositional form and learner knowledge, extending this research to assess elements of compositional form, specifically assessing what role the particle plays in learner knowledge and use, will provide evidence for learners’ apparent preference for single word verbs over phrasal verbs. Additionally, since research has suggested Spanish speakers are likely to have some difficulty in learning phrasal verbs but not a clear reason why as well as the fact that a mismatch exists between Spanish and English prepositions, they are a logical population to use to test compositional form knowledge. Based on these considerations, the following research questions have been formed:

1. Do native Spanish-speaking English learners show preference for single word verbs over phrasal verbs on receptive and productive tasks?

2. Is there a difference between the L1 Spanish-L2 English speakers as compared to native English speakers?

3. Do native Spanish-speaking English learners show sensitivity to the role of the particle in the compositional form of phrasal verbs?
Methodology

This study is a partial replication and extension of Dagut and Laufer’s 1985 study. In the original study, three groups of native Hebrew speaking English learners completed the following tasks: a multiple-choice task, a translation task and a verb memorizing task, with each task completed by a different group of learners. The study used the same 15 sentences containing phrasal verbs, which were preferred by native speakers in a pre-experiment norming task, in the 3 tests. This study will replicate the basic structure of the multiple-choice test and the translation test, plus extend those tests to a second condition that tests form/particle knowledge. It will also add a judgment test as a new third test.

Participants

The participants in the current study will be 30 native English speakers (NESs) and 30 native Spanish speaking high-proficiency English learners (NSSs/learners). The native English speakers will serve as a control group and will be recruited from a large midwestern university. These participants should not have any specialized training in linguistics or language teaching but may have experience learning other languages. The native Spanish speakers should have minimum C1 proficiency in English and have spent a minimum of 6 months living in an English-speaking country; current residence in an English-speaking country is not a requirement for participation. Previous research has suggested that time spent in an English-speaking country correlates with better phrasal verb knowledge (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007).

Materials

The sentences used in the tasks will be adapted from the PHaVE list (Garnier & Schmitt, 2015), which was previously used in an experiment on Spanish-speaking learners by Garnier and
Schmitt (2016). In order to not have sentences repeated across tasks and enough stimuli to divide across lists, forty to sixty sentences will be chosen from the available stimuli based on a number of criteria, including overall phrasal verb frequency, semantic transparency, meaning prevalence, and synonym. The overall phrasal verb frequency will be derived from Liu (2011). All phrasal verbs assessed in this task must be present in Liu’s list of the 150 most common phrasal verbs; if more than 60 sentences are available, preference will be given to those that have higher frequency, provided all other conditions are met. Additionally, for at least half of the phrasal verbs chosen, a similar phrasal verb, i.e. the same base verb with a different particle, should be present in Liu’s list. Phrasal verbs will be analyzed for semantic transparency and meaning prevalence using findings from prior research, with non-transparent verbs chosen in relation to most common meanings (Garnier & Schmitt, 2015, 2016; Gonnerman & Hayes, 2005). Finally, the phrasal verbs used in the stimuli will need to have a clear single word synonym and that synonym should not be a cognate in Spanish, based on findings from Siyanova and Schmitt (2007) that learners from Romance language backgrounds may prefer verbs of Latin origin.

Once the appropriate sentences have been identified, they will be divided into four lists with similar characteristics. These lists will be counterbalanced among the four sections of tasks 1 and 2 and the sentences in task 3 will be balanced among the 4 lists. This allows all participants to do both Task 1 and Task 2 without repeated sentences. In Dagut and Laufer’s original study, the same stimuli were used in all 3 tasks but with different groups of participants. Counterbalancing sentences across the tasks allows for a better comparison of task results because the tasks are being completed by the same group, rather than comparing results for tasks that were completed by different groups that may not have exactly the same knowledge. For
Task 3, an equivalent number of sentences will be taken from each list so that all participants will see sentences that they had previously seen in each of the conditions, helping to ensure that the task is equal for all participants.

**Experimental Tasks**

This experiment will use three tasks, two adapted from Dagut and Laufer (1985) and one new task. The two tasks from Dagut and Laufer’s study are the multiple-choice task and the verb translation task; these two tasks will be used both in the original and an adapted condition. The third task, an acceptability judgment test, will replace Dagut and Laufer’s third task. In the original multiple-choice task, participants chose between 4 options: a correct phrasal verb, a correct single word synonym, an unrelated phrasal verb, and an unrelated single word verb. On the multiple-choice task in the current experiment, half of the sentences would be in this condition and half would be modified so that the two phrasal verb options had the same base verb with different particles, as shown in Table 1 below. Adding the second condition allows for a more nuanced understanding of participants' receptive knowledge.

**Table 1: Original and modified conditions for multiple-choice task**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Modified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We didn't believe that John could ever _____ his friends.</td>
<td>We didn't believe that John could ever _____ his friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. let down</td>
<td>a. let down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. solve</td>
<td>b. solve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. disappoint</td>
<td>c. disappoint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. carry on</td>
<td>d. let over</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the original verb translation task, participants read sentences with a blank replacing the verb and a translation of the verb provided in parenthesis. Participants could fill in any verb
with the meaning on the line. For the replication, the native Spanish speakers will be provided with a Spanish translation of the verb and the native English speakers will be provided with a less common synonym. An additional condition would have the verb part of the phrasal verb and the participants would only fill in the particle. The new condition is a common task used in English textbooks when teaching phrasal verbs (Strong & Boers, 2019). In the original study, participants mostly filled in a single word verb on this task, so adding the second condition allows a better analysis of their productive knowledge of phrasal verbs. The two conditions are summarized in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Conditions for verb translation task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Any verb (original)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We didn’t believe John could ever ______ his friends. (\text{desilusionar/dissatisfy})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third task being used in this experiment is an acceptability judgment task with confidence ratings. For this task, participants will read sentences with the conditions from the second part of the first task: correct phrasal verb, correct single word synonym, incorrect phrasal verb with same base verb and incorrect single word verb and choose if the sentence is correct or incorrect. Then, they will rate their level of confidence in their acceptability judgment on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being no confidence and 5 being completely sure.

**Experimental procedure**

All tasks will be completed using Qualtrics. Prior to doing the tasks, participants will complete the consent form and LEAP-Q and LexTALE to assess proficiency. Participants who meet the proficiency criteria will then be provided a link to complete the tasks in Qualtrics. Since
all participants are completing all tasks, rather than different groups completing different tasks as in Dagut and Laufer, the order of the multiple choice and gap-fill tasks will be reversed, with participants completing the gap-fill task first, followed by the multiple-choice task then the acceptability judgment task. This should help keep the answers input in the gap-fill task from being influenced by prior completion of the multiple-choice task. If learners complete the multiple-choice task first, they may be more likely to try to write phrasal verbs on the gap-fill task, even if phrasal verbs aren’t their first inclination, as the presence of phrasal verbs on the multiple-choice task may lead them to think they’re supposed to be using phrasal verbs.

Following completion of the tasks, the native Spanish speakers will also complete a translation task, in which they translate the included phrasal verbs into Spanish to ensure that they know the verbs being used in the tasks.

Analysis

Following collection of data, different variables will be analyzed for each task and then compared using t-tests and ANOVAs. For tasks 1 and 2, the primary variables to be assessed will be correct answers and phrasal verb vs. single word synonym chosen. For task 3, correct answers by type will be analyzed and compared to confidence ratings. Variables to be analyzed are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Variables to be analyzed for each task and condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Original condition variables</th>
<th>New condition variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Multiple Choice</td>
<td>Total correct</td>
<td>Total correct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phrasal verb/single word verb</td>
<td>Phrasal verb/single word verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Translation gap-fill</td>
<td>Total correct</td>
<td>Correct/incorrect phrasal verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phrasal verb/single word verb</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Acceptability judgments</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Correct and incorrect by type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Confidence by type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Confidence by correct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Anticipated Results

For NSSs, the results from unmodified experiments should be similar to Dagut and Laufer’s results with these participants showing better receptive knowledge than productive knowledge and overall lower knowledge as compared to the native speakers. It’s possible that the findings of the modified experiments will mimic the results of the replicated experiments, but it’s more likely that the level of particle knowledge and discrimination needed for these tasks will induce a less conclusive evidence of learner knowledge. For all tasks, the native English speakers should show preference for phrasal verbs, clear ability to distinguish between similar phrasal verbs, and the ability to produce correct phrasal verbs. For learners, they should be able to choose the correct phrasal verb on the multiple-choice task when choosing between two distinct phrasal verbs but will likely have more incorrect answers or show preference for the single word verb when choosing between two similar phrasal verbs. On the gap-fill task, they will likely produce many wrong particles. Learners will likely have lower rates of correct answers for phrasal verbs on the acceptability judgment task and lower levels of confidence about their answers on these sentences as compared to both the sentences containing single word verbs and results on this task from the native speakers.

Discussion

Dagut and Laufer’s original argument was that because learners showed knowledge of and preference for phrasal verbs during the receptive task but mostly produced single word verbs during the productive task, they were simply avoiding using phrasal verbs. If the results of the tasks shows the expected lower knowledge on the multiple choice task items where learners have to decide between two similar phrasal verbs, this may indicate that the original claims of
knowledge were overstated and that the original task may have been too easy. Additionally, if learners do not show the same sensitivity to the tasks that require good knowledge of particles and the ability to distinguish between phrasal verbs that have the same base verb, this would indicate that learners may not have good knowledge of the compositional form of phrasal verbs and this lack of knowledge is likely a contributing factor in learner underuse of phrasal verbs as compared to native speakers. However, more research, especially getting direct feedback from learners on why they don’t use phrasal verbs, would be needed to definitely show that particle confusion is playing a role in learner underproduction.

There are a few challenges that may arise in this task. The decision to have the same group complete all tasks rather than having different tasks completed by different groups, as in the original study, allows for better generalizability between the tasks but it also brings up some challenges. How to balance the tasks so they don’t influence each other is one challenge. The decision to have participants do the gap-fill task first may address that challenge but it may not be possible to definitely say that the choice of phrasal verbs on the multiple-choice task wasn’t influenced by the second part of the gap-fill task. Additionally, not having different groups means that counterbalancing will be required to ensure that participants only see each sentence once; counterbalancing will require a greater number of sentences to be used and it may be difficult to meet all the criteria for choosing stimuli. Finally, doing this experiment online, rather than in a controlled population, may present some challenges with making sure the learner population is representative, since certain learners may not opt in for participation and, therefore, affect the generalizability.
References


A Guide for Pronunciation Fellows in the International Teaching Assistant Program

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Abstract

In this paper, we would like to talk about our experiences working with students from the International Teaching Assistant (ITA) Program at Michigan State University over the course of 2019-2020. The main goal of this paper is to both share our experiences and also offer advice and resources for future ITA tutors. This paper is divided into two main sections: segmentals (vowels and consonants) and suprasegmentals (word stress, intonation, etc.). Dmitrii focused on segmentals and Steven focused on suprasegmentals, though there was some overlap based on student needs. We discuss helpful resources for ITA fellows and some of the difficulties that our students had with different pronunciation features in English. Each section has suggestions about lesson planning and examples of activities from our tutoring sessions. Some of the issues that we discuss in this paper include light L/dark L, R, the minimal pair /æ/ and /e/, and different intonation patterns. The paper concludes with the list of resources for ITA students and fellows.
Authors

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Dmitrii is a Ph.D. Candidate & Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Second Language Studies program at Michigan State University. He has worked in language education since 2010 and taught Russian, French, English, TESL, and SLA courses in different institutions in Russia and the United States. His main areas of research are instructed SLA and second language psycholinguistics. Dmitrii was a Fellow in the ITA program in Fall 2019, Spring 2020, and Fall 2020.

Steven Gagnon

Steven is a Ph.D. Student & Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Second Language Studies program at Michigan State University. He has taught both ESL and Korean language courses at the university level and has worked with International Teaching Assistants both as a tutor and in various programs, such as the ACES Program and ITA Program. Steven’s research interests lie in second language pronunciation and exploring interlanguage using corpus-based methodologies. Steven was an ITA Fellow in Spring 2019 and Fall 2020.

ITA Program

The primary goal of the ITA program is to help non-native English-speaking international TAs to use English more effectively in their graduate programs. The program focuses on English pronunciation. However, it also provides a great opportunity for international TAs to learn more about the cultural norms of American universities and effective teaching techniques. As Fellows in the program, Dmitrii and Steven worked individually with ITAs during 30-45-minute tutoring sessions and held office hours to help students improve their English pronunciation. In 2020, the program was delivered entirely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To learn more about the program, please see the ITA website: https://elc.msu.edu/programs/ita/.
Segmentals – Dmitrii’s Part

Lesson Planning and Helpful Resources

Dmitrii’s segmental sessions usually started with individual sounds followed by words, phrases, and sentences (including both reading/repetition and spontaneous speech production). This structure is typical for many pronunciation resources (see Cox, Henrichsen, Tanner, & McMurry, 2019). An example of a session on the light L/dark L sounds is shown in one of the next sections of the paper. At the beginning of tutoring sessions, it was very helpful to explain how to place your tongue, lips, and jaw when pronouncing English sounds (see Figure 1 for examples). The Tools for Clear Speech (https://tfcs.baruch.cuny.edu/) was one of the most helpful resources in this regard (see Figure 2 for an example). The website includes animations of how to pronounce individual sounds as well as written instructions on how to position your tongue, lips, and jaw. Pronuncian (https://pronuncian.com/) was also a good resource. In addition to illustrations of different tongue positions, this website includes minimal pairs, lessons, and podcasts. In Google, you can also type any word and then ‘pronounce’ (e.g., pronounce ‘pool’). Google also allows you to slow down words and switch between American or British English (see Figure 3). In addition to L/R, fricatives (e.g., V/F, voiced/voiceless Th, Z/S, and Zh sounds) were particularly challenging for some of the ITAs, specifically native speakers of Chinese Mandarin and Korean (some of the challenging fricatives are shown in Figure 1).
Figure 1. Tongue position for some of the difficult segmentals (from Pronuncian)
Figure 2. Example from Tools for the Tools for Clear Speech

To make the /z/ sound:
Place the blade of your tongue (just behind the tip) very close to the roof of your mouth, behind your teeth. There should be a little space between your tongue and the roof of your mouth. Now, vibrate your vocal cords and push the air between your tongue and the roof of your mouth. You will feel some resistance.
Use the record and play buttons above to compare your pronunciation to the words below:
- close
- Zickin
- business
- please
- exactly [ɛz] [ɛz]

Figure 3. Using Google to teach pronunciation
After practicing individual sounds, Dmitrii’s sessions would then focus on words, phrases, and sentences. Home Speech Home (https://www.home-speech-home.com/) was one of the most useful resources for teaching segmentals. This website has an excellent collection of speech therapy word lists (see Figure 4). Each word list starts with individual words followed by phrases, sentences, and reading paragraphs. Home Speech Home includes examples of words, phrases, and sentences with segmentals in the initial, medial, and final positions. Here are some examples from the L word list: individual words initial (leaf, lamp, laught, etc.), medial (belly, sailing, balloon, etc.), and final (ball, mail, nail, etc.). Examples of phrases with the L sound include: initial (tall ladder, pretty lady, etc.), medial (alarm clock, helium balloon, etc.), and final (month of April, dribble the ball, etc.). As we learned from our tutoring sessions, the initial/medial/final distinction is very important for ITAs. For example, the dark L (L at the of words or syllables) was particularly difficult for some of our students.

![Articulation Chart](image)

*Figure 4. Word lists from Home Speech Home*
In addition to individual pronunciation sessions, the ITA program had office hours. The key difference between the office hours and individual pronunciation tutoring sessions is that several students can sign up for the office hours. If you have more than one student attending your office hours at a time, you could also use communicative activities (e.g., spot-the-difference, consensus, etc.) to keep your students engaged. In spot-the-difference tasks, teachers give learners two similar, but slightly different pictures (see Figure 5). The interlocutors need to communicate to find the differences (for example, there are at least 10 differences between the pictures below). Such tasks can be implemented face-to-face or online. To access different pictures and other research materials, you can use the IRIS repository (https://www.iris-database.org/).

![Figure 5. Example of Spot-the-Difference Task (Pavlenko, 2020).](image-url)
Dark L: Resources and Suggestions

Based on Dmitrii’s experiences in the ITA program, dark L was one of the most challenging segmental features for many ITA fellows. This is consistent with previous research (e.g., with Cantonese-speaking English learners, see Chan, 2010). The key to the velar dark L is the tongue position (see Figure 6).

![Light L and Dark L](https://www.callearning.com/)

**Figure 6.** Different types of L (from [https://www.callearning.com/](https://www.callearning.com/))

Really Learn English ([https://www.really-learn-english.com/](https://www.really-learn-english.com/)) was a valuable resource when teaching dark L and other segmentals. This website provides excellent examples of light and dark Ls (both individual words and words in sentences). The website also uses color coding to differentiate between different types of L (textual enhancement was very useful in ITA sessions; see Figure 7 for examples). Light L was generally not an issue (unless pronounced as an R by some of the ITAs). In general, dark L was a more challenging sound. Here is some information about dark L from Really Learn English:
The dark L sound can be represented by the symbol \( \text{"l"} \). However, most dictionaries represent both sounds with the same symbol /[ɭ]/. That confuses many language learners because there are two L sounds in English… The dark L sound is really two sounds: a vowel sound + the L sound. After making the vowel sound, the tip of your tongue will rise up and press against the back of your top teeth in the same way as the light L sound. The dark L sound is a voiced sound, so your vocal cords will make the sound.

To pronounce dark L, CAL Learning (https://www.callearning.com/) gives the following suggestions:

- The tip of tongue touches alveolar ridge, and stays there. It is not a flick, like light L.
- Dark L has a “uh-l” sound.
- The back of the tongue is raised toward the soft palate.

It is important to note that there are other ways of how to pronounce dark L. For many students it is difficult to touch their alveolar ridge. For example, some of Dmitrii’s students followed the suggestions from this YouTube video by Eat Sleep Dream English. However, when the ITAs did not touch their alveolar ridge, it was difficult to differentiate between their dark Ls and Rs (e.g., in ‘pool’ and ‘poor’).
1) I like to learn languages.
2) Lisa loves Larry a lot.
3) That is a long blog about learning.
4) It is a really good deal.
5) The small ball fell in the cool pool.
6) Call the tall girl.
7) Please leave the whole glass of milk on the table.
8) Look at the really little flag.
9) I will list all of the final details in my letter.
10) Please send the last e-mail to my family.

Figure 7. Dark and light Ls in context (from https://www.really-learn-english.com/)

Light L/Dark L (and Some R): ITA Tutoring Session

Here are some activities from one of Dmitrii’s tutoring sessions about light L/dark L. As usual, Dmitrii would start with the tongue/lips/jaw position (see Figures 1, 2, and 6). This video by Pronunciation with Emma is very helpful too. If the tip of the tongue does not touch the top of alveolar ridge and does not stay there when pronouncing dark L, words like ‘pool’ may sound like ‘poor.’ Here is the list of approximate minimal pairs that Dmitrii prepared for his students to practice final Ls and Rs:

Four-far-fall

Deer-deal

Tier-till

Pier-pill

Tire-tile
Boar-ball

Poor-pool

Core-call

Hear-heal-here-hill

Bear-bell

Where-well

Tower-towel

War-wall

Spare-spell

Tongue twisters focusing on the R-L contrast were very helpful too. Here are some difficult tongue twisters from the ESL Commando (https://eslcommando.com/2014/02/tongue-twisters-r-and-l.html):

1. Jerry’s jelly berries taste really rare.

2. Rory’s lawn rake rarely rakes really right.

3. A really leery Larry rolls readily to the road.

4. The road’s load is lessened lightly.

5. Lassie Lilly likes Ronny’s rulers.

6. Lad Larry rarely loves lyres.

7. Lessening levels of lead really lures lily pads.
8. Revelers revel in leveling levels.


10. Billy and Lilly pile pyres for file fires.

During his sessions, Dmitrii also asked questions that included words with light L/dark L and R (for contrast). Here are some examples:

1. Have you ever taken **four** classes in the **fall** semester at MSU?

2. Have you ever seen a **deer** in East Lansing?

3. Have you found any **really** good **deals** on Amazon **lately**?

4. Is it important for researchers to publish in top-**tier** journals?

5. Would you like to visit Navy **Pier** in Chicago?

6. How much money in **dollars** would you like to make to be happy?

7. Do you **regularly** work on your dissertation?

8. Do you exercise **regularly**?

9. Do you **clearly** understand your advisor’s expectations?

10. What are some **cultural** differences between the United States and South Korea?

11. Will MSU **temporarily** open its campus in the spring?

12. What is the most **popular** American band in South Korea?

13. Do you **rarely** go out these days?
**Minimal Pair /æ/ and /e/**

The distinction between /æ/ and /e/ (like in ‘bad’ and ‘bed’) was another difficult aspect of English for many ITAs. One of the most helpful resources was EnglishClub (https://www.englishclub.com/) as it included recordings of various minimal pairs. According to this resource:

If these two sounds [between /æ/ and /e/] are the same in your language, it may be difficult for you to pronounce them differently because:

- native speakers pronounce /æ/ in several different ways
- /æ/ is quite similar to /e/

The clearest difference is that /e/ is spoken with a wider, more stretched mouth. You can make this clear by seeing how your mouth gets wider and wider as you go from /æ/ to /e/ to /iː/.

One of the activities that Dmitrii used with his students was to have them pronounce words from EnglishClub in random order (e.g., bad, man, and, bed, men, end, etc.). Dmitrii would type the words that the ITAs said in Zoom using the chat.

**Suprasegmentals– Dmitrii’s Part**

**Lesson Planning and Helpful Resources**

One of the most helpful intonation resources was Learn English Today (https://www.learn-english-today.com/pronunciation-stress/intonation.html). This website
provides examples of basically every intonation pattern in English (or as they call it “the music of the language”):

- Falling intonation (statements, commands, wh-questions requesting information, question tags that are statements requesting confirmation rather than questions, and exclamations)
- Rising intonation (yes/no questions and questions tags that show uncertainty and require an answer)
- Rise-fall intonation (choices, lists, unfinished thoughts or partial statements, and conditional sentences)
- Fall-rise intonation (usually within one word; hesitation/reluctance and politeness-doubt-uncertainty)

It was important for many students to see “the big picture” of how intonation works in English. Some of them did not realize that there are so many intonation patterns.

In his intonation sessions, Dmitrii would usually follow this plan:

- Review “Learn English Today”
- Read and repeat sentences list from Speech Home Speech
- Ask questions to elicit production of certain intonation patterns:
  - For example, “Do you like your new car?” or “Do you like your old or new car?” to make ITAs emphasize different words in a sentence and practice pitch.
- Listening to TED Talks and pretending to be a presenter (https://www.ted.com/talks)
TED Talks includes subtitles and transcripts. Their transcripts are particularly helpful as they are divided into thought groups.

For our students, it was also very helpful to see the connection between stress/pitch and emotions. The following example from English with Kim was very interesting to see for many ITAs (https://englishwithkim.com/intonation-exercises/):

- Yeah (neutral)
- Yeah. (falling)
- Yeah? (rising)
- Yeah! (enthusiastic)
- Yeah!! (excited)
- Yeah!!! (super excited)
- Yeah?? (uncertain)
- Yeah???(surprise)
- Yeah... (disinterested)

Figure 8. Intonation/pitch and emotions

One of the activities that Dmitrii did with his students was to make them read “yeah” with different intonations and he needed to recognize which emotion they were trying to convey (see Figure 8).
Suprasegmentals – Steven’s Part

Lessons

There were two main sections that lessons were comprised of over the fellowship period. Those were consciousness raising activities, and individualized lessons which consisted of mainly suprasegmental practice, but with some individual work on segmental issues as necessary. The practice sessions with ITAs gave students a chance to practice suprasegmental features one-on-one with a tutor. This is important because often instructors do not focus on pronunciation in class due to various obstacles, such as lack of time, concerns about their PI (pronunciation instruction) methods, or not knowing what to focus on (Darcy, 2018). Furthermore, suprasegmentals are critical for language learners as a recent study found that Chinese L1 students who received suprasegmental PI made significant in pronunciation in terms of comprehensibility and intelligibility; their peers who only received segmental PI, on the other hand, those who only received segmental PI did not enjoy the same gains (Zhang & Yuan, 2020). Since much of the ITA population is of Chinese L1, the impacts of suprasegmentals for improving comprehensibility in the classroom cannot be ignored.

Activities will be outlined separately below, and links to resources will also be provided. Given the reality of pandemic at hand, all lessons were conducted online using Zoom. For feedback, communication outside of the lessons and contingency, a Google Doc shared between the tutor and student was used throughout the semester to keep a record of what was done during each session, to leave feedback, and comments on what would be done in the following sessions. In addition to that, Google Jamboard (an online whiteboard application) was also used to facilitate practice defining key terms and mock teaching.
1. Consciousness Raising Activities

Steven’s students were primarily focused on improving their speech in terms of suprasegmental issues, namely stress and intonation patterns and thought groups, though individual segmental issues were addressed as they came up and those were used as warm-up activities. A normal session would progress first with a warm-up game, often a minimal pair tree activity (created using https://quickworksheets.net) or a short Kahoot (https://kahoot.com) to target specific segmental features without taking away from the main focus of suprasegmentals.

The first step to teaching suprasegmentals was to first raise the students’ awareness of a) what suprasegmentals are, and b) the role suprasegmentals play in changing the meaning and tone of a sentence in English. Students may have been unaware of suprasegmentals, namely stress and intonation in English. Practice was facilitated using updated materials developed by Steven in the 2019 Fellowship. First, practice identifying where pauses and stress would go in a simple sentence was done with the student. For example, in the sentence “it was cold outside, so we decided to stay home, and watch a movie,” students would be asked to read the sentence and identify where to put a pause and which word to stress. So, in the example given, students identified pauses after outside and home, and added stress to important content words in the sentence. Here, the main focus was to raise awareness and practice adding stress and intonation.

The importance of thought groups and correct placement of stress and intonation goes beyond clarity. Meaning can also change, perhaps in dramatic and undesirable ways, should students make a social faux pas by stressing the wrong word. This is of particular importance to ITAs working with undergrad students in the Midwest who may or may not be aware of linguistic differences, and therefore be less sympathetic to such errors. As such, for the follow-up activity students were given several sentences that hold various meanings depending on the
stress or intonation pattern used. The main purpose of this activity was twofold: first, to further practice suprasegmentals in a holistic fashion, and second, to demonstrate how vastly meaning can differ. This practice was facilitated using PowerPoint slides developed by Steven (See Resources and Materials for Future ITA Use for the link to the developed slides). While the examples are quite odd, they did help the students realize that meaning does change based on intonation and the location of stress and pauses. One example is the following sentence:

I love cooking my dogs and my family.

The given sentence above was shown to students on a slide. Students were first asked to read the sentence, adding stress and putting pauses as necessary. Here, there was a primary focus on list intonation, which students were aware of from previous sessions. Most students practiced with list intonation here but were then challenged by their tutor to consider what would happen if the stress and pause pattern were shifted from list intonation to stress on love and no pauses between the list items cooking, dogs, and family. The result can be seen in the figure 8, which is an excerpt from the practice slides.
Of course, in response to this slide students would laugh, but the point was made clear. Stress and intonation matter, because the meaning can completely change depending on how suprasegmentals are produced in the sentence (e.g., incorrect stress placement or awkward pausing can impede comprehensibility by changing the meaning of the utterance). In subsequent sessions, intonation patterns (such as list intonation in the preceding example) were used as warm-up activities. For example, the following is an excerpt from the shared Google Doc with one student:
Students’ majors varied from statistics to computer science, so each had their own set of terms they needed to be able to define to their future students clearly. By doing the key terms activity we were able to tease apart any segmental issues pronouncing key terms in their field, and then move on to suprasegmental issues with individual key terms (mainly stress placement in multi-syllabic key terms and phrases, such as *hazard assessment*) and full sentence definitions. The students found this activity helpful, as many did not realize they were incorrectly placing stress on common words in their field that they use on a daily basis. For that reason, it is suggested that future ITAs also incorporate practice that facilitates the use of real language students will need once they start work as an ITA.

**Mock Teaching**

The mock teaching activity was conducted after practicing defining key terms and focusing on stress and intonation within those definitions. Part of practice teaching also included...
discussions on intonation in certain phrases, such as contrastive intonation, hedging, and phrases that can be used when teaching on Zoom and screen sharing (e.g., *Can anybody tell me what they see on the slide?*). The goal was to keep the focus on pronunciation while also offering practice with words and phrases in context that can be applied in the classroom. While the feedback and practice here will largely depend on the students’ output during the session, some recommendations for future ITAs to focus on are as follows:

- Stress placement when asking students to look at a slide/figure (e.g., *What do you see here? Can anybody tell me what they see on this slide?*).

- Intonation when asking questions to the class (*Can anybody tell me the answer? What do you think? Are there any questions*) – Oftentimes, students can appear rude if they do not use correct intonation here.

- Pauses in long sentences – In longer sentences, I found students would tend to pause at incorrect times. To point this out, as they were mock teaching, I would take note of the sentence they said in full on our shared Google Doc, and give feedback on where a pause should be placed, and also why it should be placed there. This incidental feedback was beneficial to students because they are probably unaware that they are not pausing appropriately in longer utterances. Likewise, future ITAs can also use these spontaneously produced longer sentences to alert students as to appropriate intonation patterns, or places in their speech where they need to add more emphasis (stress).

**Issues and Suggestions**

One of the main issues that came up during the tutoring sessions was simply helping students become aware of suprasegmentals in their own speech. Future ITAs may find that
students at first do not know where to place stress, which intonation pattern to use, and may even say that they do not think their tutor is using stress in their speech! That is why early on it is good to have some lessons dedicated to awareness raising using examples and TED Talks so that students can have some examples as to what they are expected to produce. Be sure to give students the metalanguage they need to discuss intonation as well. Next, given that these students are on track to become teaching assistants, shifting the focus of practice to defining key terms and mock teaching (even if it is only five minutes or so at a time) is necessary so that they can practice the stress and intonation patterns outside of isolated contexts. One way to facilitate this is by using Google Jamboard, which essentially serves as an online whiteboard. This allows students to mock teach, and the tutor can post sticky notes with reminders on which phrases should be focused on. This is especially helpful in the beginning as students can pay attention to said phrases without feeling too stressed. To summarize, a shift from isolated practice of suprasegmentals to more real-world practice is encouraged to help prepare students to teach in the classroom and online.
Figure 11. Sample of mock teaching page on Google Jamboard. This student was focusing on intonation in the phrase in the posted sticky note.

References


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**Resources and Materials for Future ITA Use**

**Tongue Twisters:**

The ESL Commando [https://eslcommando.com/2014/02/tongue-twisters-r-and-l.html](https://eslcommando.com/2014/02/tongue-twisters-r-and-l.html)

**Intonation:**

TED Talks [https://www.ted.com/talks](https://www.ted.com/talks)


English with Kim [https://englishwithkim.com/intonation-exercises/](https://englishwithkim.com/intonation-exercises/)

**Word Lists:**

Home Speech Home [https://www.home-speech-home.com/](https://www.home-speech-home.com/)
**Tongue/Lips/Jaw Position:**

Sounds of Speech [https://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/home](https://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/home)

Tools for Clear Speech [https://tfcs.baruch.cuny.edu/](https://tfcs.baruch.cuny.edu/)

**Dark L:**

CAL Learning [https://www.callearning.com/blog/2016/03/how-to-pronounce-the-letter-l/](https://www.callearning.com/blog/2016/03/how-to-pronounce-the-letter-l/)


Eat Sleep Dream English [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zf5laPOZuos](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zf5laPOZuos)

Pronunciation with Emma [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANa8UWr22x0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANa8UWr22x0)

/æ/ and /e/

EnglishClub [https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/minimal-pairs-a-e.htm](https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/minimal-pairs-a-e.htm)

**Developed Materials**

**PowerPoint Slides 1** – Focus on Stress, Pausing, Intonation. There are also examples of minimal pair trees which were used for some segmental practice.

-Note: The coordinator of the ITA Fellowship pointed out that these examples should have commas. So, future ITAs should also point out to their students that these examples should have commas, but they are omitted to give students a chance to consider the various pausing patterns that could occur in the sentences.
PowerPoint Slides 2 – Includes some activities that can be done in groups, such as a Minimal Pairs Kahoot, links to an online IPA Bingo, and tongue twisters.

TED Talk Activity

PowerPoint Slides on Light L and Dark L

Other Suggested Online Resources

Quickworksheets (for minimal pair tree creation)

Google Jamboard
MSU Working Papers in SLS
Interview with Dr. Phillip Hamrick
Kent State University

By MSU Working Papers in SLS editors:
Elizabeth Ablan, Kiyo Suga, & Dmitrii Pastushenko

Dmitrii: Has the COVID-19 pandemic permanently changed language teaching and research? Will we see its consequences even when the pandemic is over? Are there any good sides to it?

Dr. Hamrick: It's obvious that the pandemic has changed both teaching and research. The really important word in your question is 'permanent.' I do think that we're going to see at least long-term if not permanent changes. It's going to be interesting to see if we ever fall back into something that looks like 2019, or 2018. I think because we are all human beings, we are going to naturally be inclined to do human things. If that means being in a classroom, being face-to-face, being social that way, then we will slowly start to return to something that the four of us might call normal. That said, we're also learning what can and can't be done in a purely virtual format. The vast majority of my students, graduate and undergraduate, do not like this format for learning. I can appreciate that because I don't like this format for teaching. We might see a longer-term change, where regardless of your major, you're going to be having some sort of flexibility or some options as to whether or not you take a class in an in-person format, or in a hybrid or online format.

As for the last part of the question, are there good sides to this? I would argue that it slowed my laboratory work. I'm still doing a lot of writing and a lot of analysis of previously collected data, but I think slowing the lab work, at least for me, personally, has been a good thing. Another positive side is I've been able to focus on other things and that includes developing old skills, or I should say re-developing old skills that make me more flexible in the face of things like COVID. For example, I used to do a lot of computational modeling. I stopped for quite a while because I just got busy with other things. It's giving me a chance to sharpen some other skills that are needed. I think there are good sides to it, but that's partly because I'm looking for those good sides. I could totally see how somebody right now is only seeing the bad side of the situation, because it has obviously been a rough year.

Dmitrii: As a psycholinguist, you primarily conduct laboratory-based research. Are you planning to change your data collection routines in the future? Go online, maybe?
**Dr. Hamrick:** I'm already in the process of going on to the web to collect data. I'm doing less reaction time research in general, as a consequence of that. **I'm not super confident of reaction time research in the laboratory where I can control everything, as you guys know. Let alone how would I do that on the web?** Now, there are certainly tools and devices for that. All the major companies and software providers such as E-Prime, PsychoPy, and SuperLab are developing those things. I’m definitely taking my data collection routines more online. For me, I'm working on natural language processing. I recently submitted a grant with a colleague of mine where we're actually trying to diagnose Alzheimer's disease early, using language markers. All the data is already there. That's not very second language related, but that's just as an example of what I mean. I think that's going to be the wave of the future no matter what, but I'm just testing the waters right now. I'm a little bit older, too. So, some things about the internet sort of scared me. **I'm just old enough to be frightened, but, also, young enough to be optimistic, I guess.**

**Kiyo:** Because I graduated from TESOL programs, and also many current TESOL students will read this interview article, I want to ask the question about the research and pedagogy link. That is “How can we conduct instructed SLA research in a way that can provide pedagogical implications to the readers?” In previous research conducted in 80s’ and 90s’, they had very clear pedagogical implications based on the results of their studies, maybe because the research focuses of these studies were simpler than the current ones. But as the field of study developed and as we started to focus on the process of learning by employing psycholinguistic research methods in a rigorous manner, it appeared to be more difficult to provide pedagogical implications from that type of research. My question is “How do you see the relationships between ISLA research and more psycho linguistically-oriented SLA research?”

**Dr. Hamrick:** I'll start by saying that the answer entirely depends on the research question. As a general rule, everything that you would hear or learn in a research methods class still holds true. **No one study will ever definitively show everything. It's all about the accumulation of evidence over time.** No one psycholinguistic study is going to be definitive in any sense of the word and let alone pedagogically. Some phenomena that we talked about in psycholinguistics might be of use for teachers. For example, for me, one of the big ones was always the word-frequency issue. We know the effect that it has on language learning and processing, it's facilitative in a very large way. At the same time, I also know as a teacher that doesn't mean I just need to say the same word 40 times in a row, and then “Hey, it's in there, it's good. You're all done now.” I realize that teaching and learning is more complicated than that. Then I have to start asking myself, “Okay. I know this word frequency thing is important. What do I want to do with that information?” As far as what I do with that information, I still always think of Lourdes
Ortega's question of the relevance of other kinds of research for pedagogy. There's implication, and there's application. The relevance for me is, at least in the interpretation that I like to give to it, is to have teachers think to themselves when they read an article what does this tell me about my learner? What does this tell me about my own teaching? For me, as a psycholinguist, any work that I produce is going to be telling you about your learner. Learning happens only in one place, and that is in their brain. Now, that doesn't mean I'm going to do a study and you're going to instantly go, “I know how to build my curriculum around this.” What it instead means is, I hope to give you things that help you understand your learner at any given point in time. For example, one thing we know from second language psycholinguistics is that second language learners hear what we call phantom words. When they hear a phrase in English, for example, let's say, big roof, ROOF. Dutch learners of English, because of their native phonology, will actually activate the word groove. It'll be primed so that they can actually recognize the word faster. This word is being activated in their mental lexicon, in their second language, even though it wasn't even in the input. Researchers already know how lexical competition works. They already know that whenever you're trying to recognize a word, a lot of words become active. What it's showing us is the second language learners have way more noise in their lexical competition and it's going to slow down their learning process. Now, when I put my teacher hat on, I have to ask myself, what do I do with that? That's a phenomenon. That's a fact that's a replicable finding. What do I do with that as a teacher? Won't the answer depend on my teaching philosophy? It could mean something as simple as I'm going to make sure that I slow down. Or it could mean that I'm going to make sure that my learners utilize strategies to help offset that noise. It could mean maybe I'm a bad teacher, and I just say I don't care, they'll catch up sooner or later. But whatever it is, the psycholinguistic finding, the research finding gets filtered through my teaching philosophy. I always encourage TESOL students, and any language teacher who takes one of my classes in psycholinguistics, to just keep all of this stuff in mind, but filter it through their teaching philosophy. I think the relationship to any kind of classroom research, in any more sort of psychology of learning research or psycholinguistic research, is one of giving the teacher a better understanding of how their learner works. Because at the end of the day, the job of the teacher is to facilitate learning. The more they understand how their learners, person, and their mind works, the more likely they're going to be able to do that effectively.

Elizabeth: My question is related to researchers and practitioners as well. Since leaving the classroom and beginning grad school, I've noticed there seems to be a gap in the availability of language resources between researchers and practitioners. What are your thoughts on bridging this divide?

Dr. Hamrick: I'll note to start that the gap stems from multiple failures in the communication chain. Researchers by design often write articles in an esoteric sort of jargon filled way. Even the best ones are sometimes difficult to read, being heavy on statistics. At a certain level, researchers are not producing materials that teachers can do anything with. That's one break in the
communication chain. Another is how do you convey the importance of your research study to a teacher? When you only looked at 20, low frequency Spanish words learned from reading Don Quixote, how do you get anybody to do anything with that? Something like that is really being too narrow to really have a teacher do a whole lot with it. A third break in the communication chain is teachers are increasingly being saddled with more and more burden all the time. When is a teacher supposed to have time to read all this stuff, and figure out what to do with it, even if they are told explicitly what to do? Is there any hope? Is there any light at the end of the tunnel? Yes. I think we need something like a clearinghouse. In fact, there's an educational clearinghouse, and it's a repository of meta-analyses and systematic reviews of different educational trends, teaching methods and those kinds of things. I think this will help us best convey our work to teachers and communicate what they need. I think it is also important to do a lot more replication, and a lot more conceptual replication and extension. For example, if a method worked on 20, low frequency words in Spanish, French and Russian, we can maybe conclude all low frequency words can be learned with this method. I think more of those kinds of things need to exist, because then you're averaging across languages, you're averaging across features of language, you're averaging across different types of participants and learners. Then teachers can see not just one study, but the bulk of the evidence has a similar conclusion. At the same time, teachers need to understand there's the average effect size, the average bang for your buck, and then there are individual differences. There's variability around that average; that is, this is not going to be a magic bullet for all of your students. Hardly anything ever is. Don't expect more than what it delivers. As somebody who teaches in a TESL program, who himself is a psycholinguist, I used to teach ESL many, many years ago, but I've not done it in a long time. My mind is somewhere else when I'm researching. Then I go into the classroom with my students, and I have to go, okay, what are these people worried about? Because it's very different from what I'm worried about. Teachers’ hands are still bound. They have a curriculum that they're often handed, and they have to teach that no matter what. They have constraints on what they can do. But again, we're giving them as much information as we can. What they do with it will depend on the teaching philosophy, to what degree they are constrained by administrative issues or time and all those kinds of things. But until we can help get the research down to that level where it's at a clear, accessible meta-analytic interface that teachers can follow easily, and until we have that much evidence, it's going to be hard to bridge that gap. I'm optimistic, but there's a lot of work still left that needs to be done.

Kiyo: Thank you. The next question is about the research niche in the field of Instructed SLA and SLA in general. Many researchers have worked on various topics. But from your point of view, what kind of issues and topics should be further explored in future research?

Dr. Hamrick: I think it's safe enough for me to answer that I'm not sure. Honestly, as I've gotten further into my niche, I wouldn't say that my research has become less relevant for pedagogy, or for ISLA, but rather, I've just not been focused on figuring out what it is. I do research very
heavily on things like individual differences in memory, and, you know, word learning and things like that. That's definitely something of relevance for Instructed Second Language Acquisition. How that affects the future or how it should go? I'm really not sure. That said, I do think more emphasis on vocabulary is always a good idea. Linguists focus so much on formal aspects of language. But the meat and potatoes of communication, in any sense of the word, really is vocabulary. That includes things like multi-word sequences, or formulaic language or whatever. I think it would be nice to see more integration of Corpus and computational tools, in Instructed Second Language Acquisition, whether we like it or not. Instruction, that part of it is going to be more and more computerized, going forward. We need to make sure that we understand the impacts of that on language learning and language teaching. If there's one other direction, broadly speaking, that I'd like to see the field go, I would like to see the unnecessary division between more what has been called psycholinguistic quantitative on the one side and sociolinguistic qualitative on the other side. But in this case, I would like to see that. We all pay lip service to that. We all say that would be the ideal, but whether or not we actually didn't act on it and make a move to put things together. That becomes the big question, “Are you willing to employ the right kinds of methods?” Are you willing to read the theoretical ideas from the opposing side, or if not the opposing side, the complimentary side, how we should be looking at it? I think more of that would be definitely helpful. That's a meta level for the field.

Kiyo: I see. That's very interesting. And actually, I'm taking a qualitative research method class this semester. Once I started to read several qualitative research articles, it changed my view and gave me another view to see issues from a new angle, which was really productive.

Dr. Hamrick: Yes, and I always encourage students to do that. That's a great idea.

Kiyo: Here at MSU, first year SLS students usually interview core faculty members, and I asked this question to my advisor, and I'm curious how do you see your contribution to the field of SLA based on your previous works?

Dr. Hamrick: I've always been most concerned with understanding what roles general learning and memory systems play in language, especially in L2. So, I think the general approach for me has always been to verify that those things do play a role. Does something like implicit or statistical learning play any role at all? Does declarative memory play any role at all? Then once I get some evidence that it does, I kind of keep that ball rolling and accumulate that evidence. If it all looks like it's going in the same direction, then I start to ask myself the hard question, which is to figure out What is that role? How does that work? What is sort of mechanically happening? For example, episodic memory is a good case in point. For a while now, I've been looking at the role of episodic memory in second language, especially word learning and word processing. I've got three or four studies, several of which are published. Now that shows it's involved, at least at the level of individual differences, and that dovetails with what we see in neuroimaging and
some other psycholinguistic studies on processing. So that's all great. Then the next question is, why, how, in what exact sort of way? One of the ways that I'm looking at that is through something else I just recently published with my colleague, Nick Pandža, and that is the role of contextual diversity or semantic diversity, which is sort of a corpus-based way of operationalizing episodic memory in language. It’s sort of saying, what if each exposure to a word was an episode? What if we computationally treated it that way? Can it be explained how second language word learners process the words and learn the words and things like that? And we’re seeing that it fits exactly with what we would expect. We go from this sort of big picture question, and I start to carve down into some of the specifics. I would say in general, though, I feel like the contribution I want to make by the time I retire, is to have a pretty good view of what roles those general learning and memory processes play in second language acquisition, and hopefully they make sense. If they don't make sense, then at least we can rule them out.

**Kiyo:** Thank you very much. My last question is about PhD life. So, looking back on your PhD life at Georgetown, what kind of advice would you give to SLS PhD students at MSU?

**Dr. Hamrick:** In being in SLS at Michigan State, you guys are clearly in the top tier of people out there, you guys really do excellent work, both as faculty and as graduate students. Take advantage of that. That's the first thing I'll tell you. Don't lose sight of how good you have it. That means work harder. That means, which you may not be happy to hear, it means read everything you can get your hands on. And when you find something that's in your area, and you figure out what your area is, read everything there and read it twice. Read it three times, read it four times. When I learned about implicit learning at Georgetown, I read everything again and again. I would spend my entire commute on the train to and from school reading and rereading and rereading and rereading the same stuff. Take advantage of that. That's all part of working harder and taking advantage of what you have there. That said, still take time out to play and enjoy being whatever ages you are and having the colleagues that you have. Have coffee together, spend time with your colleagues, even if that means you are both just sitting in the same room, working on your computers not talking to each other. Socially distance, obviously. But you know, because those moments you're going to look back on very, very fondly, because that will shape your relationship with your colleagues. I used to sit in coffee shops for 6-7-8 hours, over and over again with colleagues, dear friends of mine. We wouldn't say anything to each other for like, three, four hours at a time because we were working. But we were sharing that space in that moment together. And that brought us together even without having to talk more. So, once you're a professor, you'll kind of miss that, because then you're going for tenure, and you're busy with that, or you've got a family or, you know, your coworkers are just not cool, or whatever. But the point is, work harder to take advantage of what you have, but also play harder. So just do everything more.