

DOCUMENTARY FILM REVIEW

I Speak Arabic by Diana Scalera

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The first of its kind, the documentary film on Arabic heritage speakers “I Speak Arabic” is a timely contribution to the field of heritage language teaching and learning. The film was created by Diana Scalera, who teaches Spanish to heritage students at the High School for Environmental Studies in New York City. It features a diverse group of East Coast Arabic heritage language speakers, parents, instructors and two experts in the field of heritage language teaching and learning. This film’s balanced combination of interviews with members of the community and teachers of Arabic heritage speakers on the one hand, and specialists in the field of heritage language on the other, makes it a valuable resource for both groups. While the film is rich with personal stories, it also presents a coherent and accessible theoretical basis for understanding how heritage speakers learn.

The film seeks to answer four questions:

1. Who are heritage language learners?
2. What difficulties do heritage learners encounter?
3. How can parents and educators help?
4. How can heritage language learners be supported?

The first question is answered by the Arabic speakers at the beginning of the film, who say, in Arabic (with English subtitles), that they speak Arabic. These speakers represent five variants of Arabic, which is a drop in the ocean of Arabic varieties spoken in the U.S. Presenting this linguistic, religious, geographical, and cultural diversity in this film counters the stereotyping that results in treating Arabic speakers in the U.S. as a homogeneous group, similar to the stereotyping of U.S. Latinos, as Scalera insightfully states at the beginning of the film. Awareness of this diversity is a major step in creating a supportive environment that helps the student work towards retaining rather than losing their second language.

In the film, John Webb, Director of Teacher Preparation at Princeton University, uses Joshua Fishman’s definition to characterize heritage learners as students with an emotional connection to a language other than English. This definition can be opposed to Valdés’ (2000) proficiency-based definition¹, and may be more applicable to the context presented in the film because of its inclusiveness. For example, the Fishman definition allows for the inclusion of the Pakistani in the film, a heritage Urdu speaker seeking to learn standard Arabic for religious purposes, as well as the student from a non-Arab background whose family grew up in the Arab world.

Although the film focuses on Arabic heritage learners, almost all the issues it raises are shared by other heritage speakers in the United States. The second question, for

¹ Valdés (2000) defines “heritage speaker” as a student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language.”

example (“What Difficulties do Heritage Learners Encounter?”), addresses heritage students’ multiple dialects, the sociolinguistic tension with the standard variety taught in the classroom and the implications of such a conflict for the students’ confidence and motivation to learn and retain their language. This tension is particularly acute in Arabic because of its diglossic nature and the almost exclusive emphasis traditionally given to the standard language (known as Classical Arabic, literary Arabic, or Modern Standard Arabic) in the classroom. The film also addresses society’s ambivalence if not bias against bilingualism, and draws similarities between the linguistic situation of Arabic speakers and that of other immigrant groups in the United States. It underscores the sense of mistrust towards speakers of non-English languages and points out that at a time when the country’s linguistic needs for Arabic are most acute, there is an “increased harassment and scrutiny” of its speakers following September 11, 2001.

John Webb describes heritage language learners as “experts at being invisible ... When they are at school, they seek, often desperately, to hide the fact that they speak a language other than English and participate in a culture other than the U.S. culture.” According to Webb, this behavior is triggered by “signals from us ... that that language and that culture aren’t valued and aren’t appreciated and in many instances aren’t wanted within the learners’ setting.” Heritage speakers’ ambivalence about their linguistic and cultural identity is illustrated by personal stories of embarrassment about their names, food, and families’ use of the Arabic language, in a school setting where children want to be “like everybody else,” as Carmen, a young woman originally from Egypt noted. Rawia, a Palestinian Christian mother, recounted a lunch box story in which her children returned their grape vine leaf meals and asked for peanut butter sandwiches instead. She also commented on the school’s lack of cultural awareness; for example, they took her daughter out of one of the school’s religious activities because “she was Palestinian,” not realizing that one can be Palestinian and Christian.

Another challenge learners and teachers of heritage Arabic face is a scarcity of resources and, until very recently, the absence of a methodology oriented toward teaching heritage learners. Failure to meet the needs of Arabic heritage speakers continues to be widespread in university-level Arabic programs around the country.

To answer the third question (“How can parents and educators help?”) the documentary focuses on testimonies of positive outcomes for children and their families as they gain confidence and pride in their bilingual identity. Rawia, the Palestinian Christian mother, recommends enlisting the teachers’ support in helping children understand biculturalism. After she made Palestinian food for the school, the other children started asking her children if they had any traditional food packed for lunch. Rawia pointed out that it is important to help children feel that “what they have is acceptable to others and then it will be acceptable to them.” Lillian Farhat, an Arabic instructor at Rutgers University, recommends incorporating the various dialects that the Arabic students bring to class in the classroom activities rather than focusing on the standard form of the language. She adds that it is important to “avoid intimidation by the classical/standard language” and to make clear to the students that whatever colloquial (spoken Arabic or dialect) they bring to the classroom is valuable.

In response to the question “How can heritage language learners be supported?” the film offers a collection of sound recommendations. While acknowledging that heritage language learners are “probably among the least served in our school settings” as

Webb suggests, the film offers hopeful and practical solutions for these students. Three students of Palestinian origin suggested that students be involved in curriculum design to help teachers and classmates learn about their history and culture. Addressing the issue of peer pressure, a student proposed helping other children “recognize the importance of language acquisition and treat it as a cool thing, a desirable thing.” Webb emphasized the importance of providing “teachers and administrators and those who work with learners in school environments with a framework for acquiring as much information as they can about those learners ... to serve those youngsters better.” Criticizing schools that overlook bilingual students’ linguistic talents by focusing on literacy in English only, Diana Scaleria advocates a different approach. “What needs to happen,” she says, “is that these students are viewed for their talents and that those talents are given the support that they need in order for these students to become fully literate in all the languages that they are exposed to.”

“I Speak Arabic” is an informative and engaging film, containing valuable pedagogical guidelines and recommendations for any community involved with heritage learners of any language.

WORKS CITED

Fishman, Joshua A. "300-Plus Years of Heritage Language Education in the United States." *Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource*. Joy Kreeft Peyton, Donald A. Ranard, and Scott McGinnis, Eds. Yonkers, NY: ACTFL, 2000: 81-97.

Valdés, Guadalupe. Introduction. *Spanish for Native Speakers: AATSP Professional Development Series Handbook for Teachers K-16, Vol. 1*. New York, NY: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000.

NOTES

1. Fishman (2001: 81) defines heritage languages as those that "have a particular family relevance to the learner."
2. Valdés (2000: 1) defines "heritage speaker" as a student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language."

More information on the video can be found on the web site: www.ispeakarabic.org.