

Towards Arabic for Specific Purposes: a survey of students majoring in Arabic holding professional expectations

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Abstract

Appropriate knowledge of learners is fundamental for planning successful courses. Especially in Europe, we often lack a precise idea of the background and aspirations of the students of Arabic. Surveys on this topic are all the more meaningful in the case of Arabic for specific purposes (ASP), a field in expansion that should be oriented according to real needs. This study investigates 205 students majoring in Arabic and enrolled in BA and MA degree courses in Linguistic and Cultural Mediation in Italy. The materials used consist in a questionnaire of 51 items enquiring into the students' motivations, job orientations, and language learning history. The sets of items are rated through a 7-point Likert scale and validated with Cronbach's α test. The results are discussed through descriptive statistics and different groups of learners are compared by using inferential statistics. The population surveyed often took Arabic because of instrumental motivations related to the development of professional skills. Students are interested in specific linguistic areas, such as politics, diplomacy, administration, media, but also areas of business and tourism, and translation. The secondary education received also affects learners' orientations. Needs analysis highlights which specific courses are perceived as more relevant and also helps set a framework for further developments in the teaching of ASP.

Keywords: Arabic for specific purposes, learners of Arabic, motivation, professional orientations, needs analysis.

Resumen

Hacia el árabe para fines específicos: una encuesta de estudiantes que se especializan en árabe con expectativas profesionales

Para planificar cursos con éxito, es fundamental conocer bien al público de las actividades de aprendizaje. Con frecuencia, en especial en Europa, es muy escaso el conocimiento que se tiene de los antecedentes y las aspiraciones de los estudiantes de árabe. Este hecho es todavía más patente en el caso del árabe para fines específicos (ASP, por sus siglas en inglés), un campo en expansión que debe satisfacer necesidades reales. Esta investigación estudia una población de 205 estudiantes que actualmente se están especializando en árabe y están matriculados en los cursos de licenciatura y maestría en Mediación Cultural y Lingüística en Italia. Los materiales utilizados consisten en un cuestionario con 51 elementos que indagan las motivaciones de los estudiantes, sus orientaciones laborales y su historial de aprendizaje de idiomas. Las distintas agrupaciones de elementos se clasifican con una escala *Likert* de 7 puntos y se validan con la prueba α de Cronbach. Los resultados se interpretan por medio de estadísticas descriptivas y se comparan los diferentes grupos de estudiantes utilizando estadística inferencial. En su mayoría, la población encuestada ha elegido estudiar árabe por motivaciones instrumentales relacionadas con el desarrollo de habilidades profesionales. El interés de los estudiantes se concentra en áreas lingüísticas específicas tales como la política, la diplomacia, la administración o los medios de comunicación, pero también en áreas de los negocios y el turismo, y en la traducción. El análisis de necesidades deja entrever que la educación secundaria recibida afecta a la orientación de los alumnos, así como a su percepción de qué cursos específicos son más relevantes. Los resultados obtenidos en este estudio, por tanto, pueden ayudar a establecer un marco para futuras directrices en la enseñanza de ASP.

Palabras clave: árabe para fines específicos, estudiantes de árabe, motivación, orientaciones profesionales, análisis de las necesidades.

Introduction

In the last two decades enrollment in Arabic courses has witnessed a major shift. After 9/11 the students who take Arabic at university increased in both number and level of achievement in the USA, where Arabic has become one of the “critical-need languages”, according to the national administration (Taha, 2007). A similar general shift is also ongoing in Italy. Here too, a greater demand for specialized courses in Arabic is quickly emerging as students start to gain proficiency faster than before, due to the growing number of those already acquainted with Arabic when they first begin attending university. Little research has been conducted on these students’ actual needs so far, but a needs analysis is relevant to determine which varieties of professional Arabic are more in demand. Thorough enquiry in

this regard is also appropriate in order to set up a framework for the emergent field of Arabic for specific purposes (ASP) and to develop syllabi, learning materials, and teaching methods for the most urgently needed varieties.

The aim of this study is to determine the motives and professional orientations of the students taking Arabic at a major public university in Italy and to sketch an outline of their learning needs and profile. The setting of the survey, two degree courses in Mediation, is particularly appropriate as it provides a preliminary skimming of the target population: students taking these courses are less interested in Koranic studies or Literature than their peers and more concerned with acquiring an effective professional profile. This is the first study carried out in a European continental context that pays specific attention to the learners' professional orientation by supplying a large number of items with a highly sensitive scale. The study also provides a focus on the students' foreign language (FL) educational history and uses parametric and non-parametric testing to ascertain possible differences among the subgroups of the surveyed population.

State of the art

Students of Arabic have been surveyed as regards their motivational orientations¹ mostly in the US and US related language institutes. An early sample of a questionnaire-based study is Belnap (1987), which surveyed 24 universities in the US and Canada, with a total of 568 students. The study offers insights regarding improvements the students would like to see in their courses. Kuntz and Belnap (2001) widens the perspective and at the same time moves it out of the US borders. The article focuses on the beliefs about language learning held by 71 US students attending 2 Arabic programs in Morocco and Yemen and 17 of their local teachers. It highlights how the conceptions of learners and instructors can diverge in many regards. Belnap (2006) reports another mass survey of over 600 students from 37 institutions. It highlights the variety of reasons for which students enroll in Arabic courses, such as the desire to learn about Arab culture, understand the press, travel, and interact with natives. Kenny (1992) provides an early enquiry about motivation and attitudes of heritage Arabic learners, whereas Husseinali published two articles surveying motivational orientations of mixed groups. The first study (2005) is based

on open interviews with 3 students and shows how the learners' achievement, motivation, and perception of the relevancy of what is being learnt in class to their goals are all features connected to each other. The second study (2006) uses statistics to determine the initial motivations of 120 students. It identifies 3 major types of orientations, focuses on the differences between subgroups, and highlights the specificity of cultural and language heritage learners, which the author gathers in one and the same group. The paper by Winke and Weger-Guntharp (2006) is similar to the previous survey in some regards but it covers over 320 learners from 11 North-American institutions. It discloses how different levels of proficiency can articulate different motivations, by making some of them salient when progressing from a lower to a higher level, or after socio-political changes. Simpler in its approach and smaller as regards the surveyed population, Brosh's study (2013) relies on a questionnaire and interviews to enquire into motivational orientations with attention to the inner-self theory, whereas Taha (2007) surveys 142 students at a HBCU by focusing on two main points: the utilitarian and the integrative dimensions of learning Arabic. Seymour-Jorn (2004) also sheds light on an American-Arab students' community in Milwaukee, where learning Arabic is mostly aimed at maintaining cultural identity and relationships to their internationally located families.

Temples (2010) shifts the focus from university to lower secondary level. The study divides the surveyed subjects of a charter school into three groups (language heritage, cultural heritage, and foreign language learners), trying to link them to their motivational orientations as an alternative to their proficiency levels. The surveyed learners' age further decreases in Engman's (2015) study, that focuses on cultural and language heritage students at primary school. By observing class activities and carrying out interviews, the research interrogates the way in which the students' religious identity intersects with their social and academic identities. Like Husseinali (2006), Engman also reaches the conclusion that religion can serve as a resource for learning Arabic even in the absence of actual family links to the language itself.

Further studies are related to the learning of Arabic in settings different from US universities. Ghenghesh (2010) surveys 140 learners from 35 countries studying Arabic in Tripoli. The article offers a wide variety of tables with statistics-based data collected through quantitative and qualitative methods. It also investigates the decline of motivation with age, and the

possible reasons for this. The teacher's role, as well as contact with native speakers, is stated as fundamental in motivating the learners. Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2014) carries out research on classical motivational orientations of 90 students of different nationalities in two Jordan universities, highlighting statistical differences between individuals according to their continent of origin. Kaseh et al. (2010) surveys 225 students in Malaysian universities and reaches the conclusion that, although the results support the appropriateness of Deci and Ryan's (1985) intrinsic/extrinsic motivational model, a newly derived religious motivational subscale seems to encompass both types of motivations. Finally, students of Arabic and their opinions on the target language have also been recently surveyed in Spain. Aguilar and Fernández Fondría (2016) investigate the motivations, self-perception of efficacy and learning preferences of over 400 students of different ages and from diverse education contexts.

Methods

Participants

205 students participated in this survey. They were students majoring in Arabic in BA or MA degree courses in Linguistic and Cultural Mediation at the main University of Milan (Università degli Studi) in A.Y. 2018-2019². All the subjects were studying Arabic and another European or non-European language in parallel as a requirement for their degree. Another requirement was to study the cultures related to the chosen languages and a number of other courses from: International Organizations, International Politics, History, Economics, Comparative Law Systems, Sociology, Cultural Geography, Media System, Professional Translation, and so forth. A detailed profile of the participants in the survey is given below.

Instruments

The materials used in this study consisted of a questionnaire made up of 51 items. The items were divided into 3 sections. Section 1 (Q1-Q21) investigated the learners' motivational orientations for studying Arabic. It consisted of 19 randomly ordered items that focused on different types of scales grouped into three main factors: extrinsic, intrinsic, and relational/integrative. The items presented were based on previous research surveys and adapted with a certain degree of freedom due to the specificities

related to Arabic. Especially relevant in the composition of this part of the questionnaire were: Ely (1986), Wen (1997), and Husseinali (2006). Further models were also used in order to integrate it, such as Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010), Gonzales (2010), Gonzales and Lopez (2016), and Noels et al. (2000)³. A 7-point Likert scale was used to grade the students' preferences, where number 1 corresponded to "Disagree completely" and number 7 corresponded to "Perfectly agree". The Cronbach's α coefficient reliability index of this section was .76. Section 2 (Q22-Q37) investigated the participants' professional orientations. 15 options were offered, selected according to previous informal interviews with students and different stakeholders. In this case a 7-point Likert scale was also proposed to express the respondents' preferences. The Cronbach's α coefficient of this session was .75. Section 3 (Q38-Q51) collected personal information. This comprised general statistical details and information on the participants' language learning history.

Procedures

The questionnaires were administered to the students in early 2018-2019 during regular Arabic lessons. The researcher visited the classes more than once in order to reach the widest audience possible.

The responses of each individual participant were encoded using Excel. Descriptive statistics were used to profile the surveyed population, its language history, and the average responses for the two initial sessions. Non-parametric tests, such as the Mann Whitney test and the Kruskal-Wallis test, were later used to compare the responses of the participants according to gender, degree level, ethnic background, and secondary education.

Results and Discussion

Surveyed population

As for the composition of the surveyed population, 175 (85.4%) of the subjects were female, whereas only 30 (14.6%) were male (Q38). On the whole, female students were thus by far the majority of students attending the Arabic classes. When considering the degree levels (Q40), 168 (82%) of the participants were BA students, while 37 (18%) were MA students. See Figure 1 for the distribution of the participants according to the class attended.

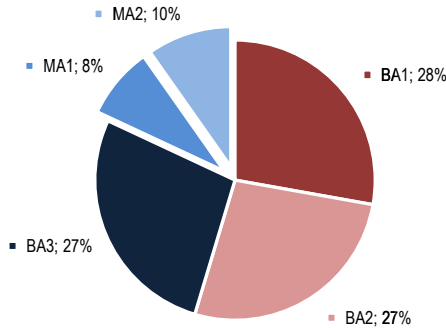


Figure 1. Academic standing of the students of Arabic in 2018-2019.

Surprisingly, the survey did not highlight an evident attrition rate within the MA degree between the first and second years, as has been observed in other surveys. Instead, the attrition was evident between the two degree levels, with a much lower number of graduate students attending classes of the MA degree.

According to their self-evaluation (Q49), the participants in the survey had different levels of proficiency in Arabic. Given the classes attended and the period in which the questionnaire was handed out (mid of the first semester), the majority positioned themselves between levels A1 (35.6%) and A2 (27.3%). Only rarely did they estimate that they were at a lower level (A0: 8.8%), or at a higher one (B1: 13.2%; B2: 6.7%; C1 and C2: 8.3% in all). 5.4% of them claimed to be native speakers.

| | Median | Mean | Min | Max |
|-----|--------|------|-----|-----|
| BA1 | 19 | 22 | 18 | 60 |
| BA2 | 20 | 21.1 | 19 | 43 |
| BA3 | 21 | 24 | 20 | 73 |
| MA1 | 23 | 23.2 | 22 | 29 |
| MA2 | 24 | 24.5 | 22 | 31 |

Table 1. Distribution of participants' age.

Most of the respondents were aged between 19 and 24 years old (Q39). In most cases, the students were in line with their expected curriculum. This helps contain the attrition rate. See Table 1 for the distribution of the participants according to their age.

As for the country of birth (Q42), 174 (84.9%) of the respondents were born in Italy, whereas 31 (15.1%) were natives of other countries. 20 (9.7%) of those born out of Italy were natives of Arabic countries. See Figure 2 and Table 2.

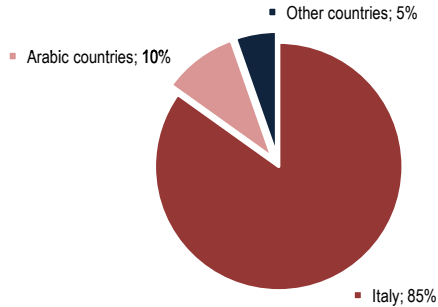


Figure 2. Countries of birth of the participants (general percentages).

| | | Country of birth | Frequency |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|-----------|
| <i>Italy</i> | | Italy | 174 |
| | <i>Arabic countries</i> | Morocco | 8 |
| Egypt | | 7 | |
| Tunisia | | 2 | |
| Kuwait | | 2 | |
| Lebanon | | 1 | |
| <i>Other countries</i> | Albania | 2 | |
| | Chad | 2 | |
| | China | 1 | |
| | Israel | 1 | |
| | Japan | 1 | |
| | Nigeria | 1 | |
| | Romania | 1 | |
| | Ukraine | 1 | |
| | Uruguay | 1 | |

Table 2. Countries of birth of the participants (details).

As for the languages spoken by the subjects in their families (Q42), 153 (74.6%) spoke only Italian, 18 (8.8%) spoke only Arabic, 22 (10.7%) spoke either Arabic or Italian, 12 (5.9%) spoke other languages (see Figure 3). This highlights a fairly high rate of plurilingual subjects.

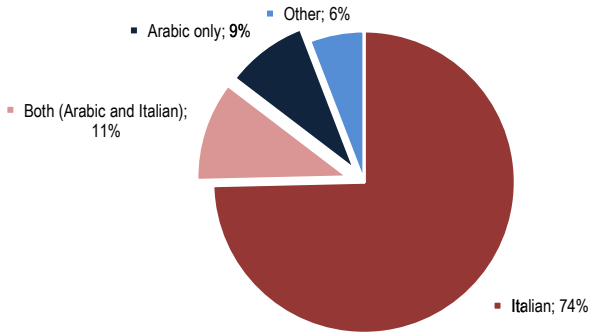


Figure 3. Languages spoken in the respondents' families.

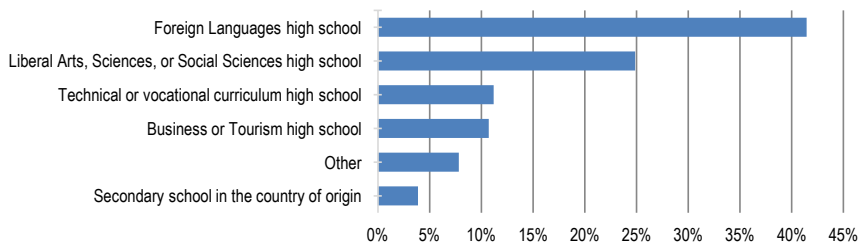


Figure 4. Secondary schools attended by the respondents.

The Italian secondary school education system is made up of numerous types of schools that can greatly vary in different respects. The secondary school attended holds a relevant position in the student's academic career, particularly because of the quality of teaching, the autonomy it develops in the learners, the study load the students are acquainted with, and the language educational track it offers, as well as the learning methods that are used to teach the students. When dealing with young adult learners, as is the case for university, their extant learning attitudes, beliefs, and motivations, should be held in high consideration when devising the teaching methodology for classes.

Figure 4 shows what schools the surveyed students attended before university (Q43). Foreign Languages high schools were by far the most represented (41.5%). This has definitely good implications for the learners, as it means that they have already undergone a thorough language education before starting their university career. Students attending this kind of high school usually learn 3 modern FLS and, in addition to these, they may also

study Latin. Therefore, they develop solid linguistic knowledge, are used to attentive linguistic analysis, and also learn how to best deal with formalistic approaches to language teaching. They are experienced in achieving FL international certifications and are sensitive to their importance. Respondents who attended Tourism or Business high schools were dramatically less in number (11.2%). Tourism high schools have some similarities to the previous kind of schools, as here the students may also study up to 3 FLs. The teaching method used is communicative. There is no formalistic approach to the FL and the linguistic analysis is only studied in a functional perspective. The workload is also lighter, but a good deal of attention is usually paid to international certification and exchange programs, through which the FLs are studied in context. Liberal Arts, Science and Social Science high schools were attended by 24.9% of the respondents. Although these kinds of school offer wide cultural foundations, promote autonomy in the learners and train them to face a thorough intellectual workload, they also leave an imprint that can be quite formalistic (especially for students learning both ancient Greek and Latin). Despite being well appreciated in general, these schools can offer less in terms of a modern FL education. Finally, 19% of the students opted for Secondary schools with technical or vocational curricula. They were taught one FL, although it was less relevant in their curriculum.

| | 1 FL | 2 FLs | 3 FLs | 4 or more FLs | TOTAL |
|------------|-------|-------|-------|---------------|--------|
| Frequency | 55 | 33 | 37 | 80 | 205 |
| Percentage | 26.8% | 16.1% | 18.1% | 39.0% | 100.0% |

Table 3. Number of FLs studied at secondary school by the respondents.

| FLs | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------|-----------|------------|
| English | 201 | 98.0% |
| French | 108 | 52.7% |
| Spanish | 89 | 43.4% |
| Latin/Ancient Greek | 75 | 36.6% |
| German | 54 | 26.3% |
| Arabic | 14 | 6.8% |
| Chinese | 7 | 3.4% |
| Russian | 2 | 1.0% |
| Japanese | 1 | 0.5% |
| Hebrew | 1 | 0.5% |
| Polish | 1 | 0.5% |

Table 4. FLs studied at secondary school by the respondents.

Effects of secondary education can thus be evaluated in different regards. The first one is the type and number of languages the respondents were exposed to in their previous career (Q44). Only 1 out of 4 students had previously studied just one FL; 1 out of 3 studied 2 or 3 FLs; and 39% studied 4 or more. These generally encouraging data can foretell the learners' confidence when facing new linguistic challenges; however, the kinds of language that were studied can lessen this positive perspective. Only very rarely, in fact, were students familiar with languages of completely different linguistic families that used non-Latin alphabets. Beside those studying ancient Greek, only a limited number of respondents had previous contact with languages such as Chinese, Russian, Japanese, Hebrew, and/or Arabic itself. See Table 3 and Table 4 for details. As late contact with a new language makes its acquisition more difficult, and even more so when its structures are unlike that of the mother tongue, studying Arabic becomes more challenging for most of the respondents. Furthermore, the expectation of a heavy cognitive load for learning Arabic may also prevent the students from taking another LCTL, or a language commonly perceived as demanding (Q45). Finally, as can be noticed from the tables, the languages studied at university normally overlap with those studied at secondary schools. University is less a place for language novelties in this regard. See Table 5 and Figure 5 for detailed information.

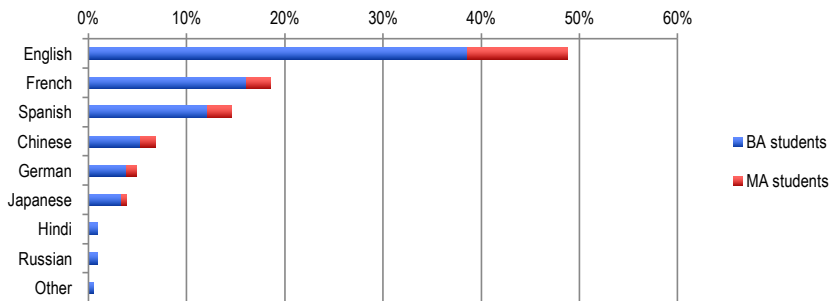


Figure 5. Other requirement language studied at university according to degree levels.

| Language | Frequency | | | Percentage | | |
|--------------|------------|-----------|------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | BA | MA | Total | BA | MA | Total |
| English | 79 | 21 | 100 | 47.0% | 56.8% | 48.8% |
| French | 33 | 5 | 38 | 19.6% | 13.5% | 18.5% |
| Spanish | 25 | 5 | 30 | 14.9% | 13.5% | 14.6% |
| Chinese | 11 | 3 | 14 | 6.5% | 8.1% | 6.8% |
| German | 8 | 2 | 10 | 4.8% | 5.4% | 4.9% |
| Japanese | 7 | 1 | 8 | 4.2% | 2.7% | 3.9% |
| Hindi | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1.2% | 0.0% | 1.0% |
| Russian | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1.2% | 0.0% | 1.0% |
| Other | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0.6% | 0.0% | 0.5% |
| TOTAL | 168 | 37 | 205 | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

Table 5. Other requirement language studied at university according to degree levels.

A second effect of the secondary education received was that respondents proved to be sensitive towards international FL certifications (Q47). More than 2 out of 3 achieved at least one of these certifications, whereas 22% received 3 or more (Figure 6 and Table 6). Inferential statistics highlighted a significant difference between types of schools ($p .0005$ with Fisher’s exact test), with the predictably highest number of certified students among those who attended Foreign Languages high schools. Students from secondary schools with technical or vocational curricula also achieved a good number of certifications on the whole. This is because Arabic heritage students –who attended in most cases these kinds of schools– proved to be very attentive to the international certifications.

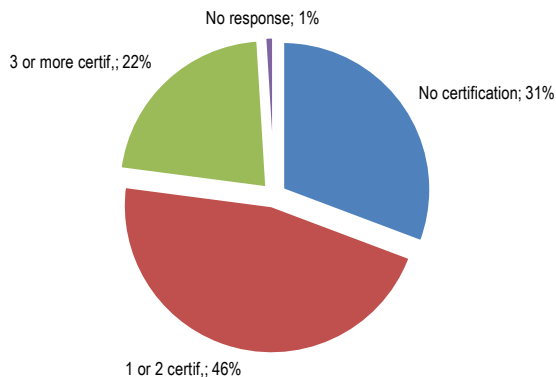


Figure 6. Number of certifications achieved by the respondents.

| Certifications | BA1 % | BA2 % | BA3 % | MA1 % | MA2 % |
|-------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| No certification | 42.1 | 25.5 | 26.8 | 17.6 | 35.0 |
| 1 or 2 certif. | 40.4 | 54.5 | 46.4 | 47.1 | 40.0 |
| 3 or more certif. | 17.5 | 20.0 | 25.0 | 29.4 | 25.0 |
| No response | 0.0 | 0.0 | 1.8 | 5.9 | 0.0 |
| TOTAL | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Table 6. Number of certifications achieved by the respondents according to their degree level (percentage).

A further long-lasting effect of the secondary education received was especially evident in the performance at the annual assessments for Arabic (Q48; see Table 7). Fisher's exact test highlighted a statistically significant difference according to the types of secondary schools attended ($p .0070$). The students who performed better were those who had attended Liberal Arts, Sciences, or Social Sciences schools: all of them sat for their exam successfully and 51.4% achieved top evaluations. The average evaluation for the students from Foreign Languages secondary schools was somewhat lower, but 50% of them received top marks. On the contrary, 41% of the students who attended secondary schools with technical or vocational curricula failed or did not sit for any Arabic exams. The same percentage achieved top evaluation, with this subgroup mostly made up of Arabic heritage students.

It should be noted that a statistic difference of $p .0055$ was also recorded when comparing the performance of the students who studied Latin and ancient Greek at secondary school to that of all the others. Linking the formalistic approach the students got used to when studying these languages and the teaching styles and methods of assessment in use at university can help explain this result.

| | Foreign Languages | Liberal Arts, or Sciences | Tourism or Business | Technical or Vocational | Other | In country of origin | Total |
|--------------|-------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|--------------|----------------------|---------------|
| No exam | 7 (10.9%) | 0 (0.0%) | 3 (27.3%) | 7 (41.2%) | 3 (27.3%) | 1 (16.7%) | 21 (14.4%) |
| 18-22 | 4 (6.3%) | 3 (8.1%) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (5.9%) | 2 (18.2%) | 2 (33.3%) | 12 (8.2%) |
| 23-26 | 21 (32.8%) | 15 (40.5%) | 4 (36.4%) | 2 (11.8%) | 2 (18.2%) | 3 (50.0%) | 47 (32.2%) |
| 27-30 | 32 (50.0%) | 19 (51.4%) | 4 (36.4%) | 7 (41.2%) | 4 (36.4%) | 0 (0.0%) | 66 (45.2%) |
| TOTAL | 64 | 37 | 11 | 17 | 11 | 6 | 146 |

Table 7. Distribution of the average evaluations in Arabic achieved according to the secondary education received.

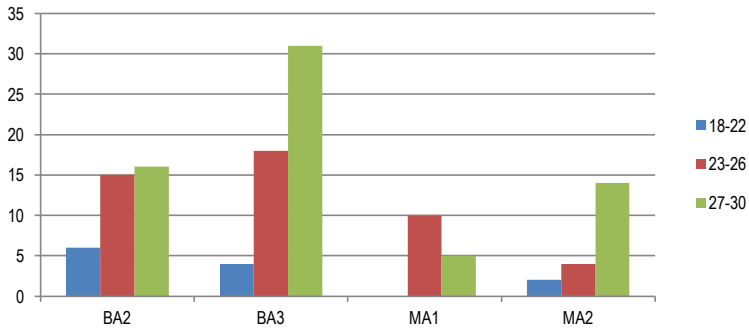


Figure 7. Average proficiency levels for annual assessments of Arabic (frequency).

Motivational orientations

This section of the questionnaire highlights the reasons that led the respondents to choose Arabic. The items were divided into 3 scales: 7 items pertained to extrinsic motivation factors (2 to circumstantial factors and 5 to instrumental reasons), 7 to intrinsic motivation factors (2 related to stimulation of the language/perception of self-efficacy, 3 to desire of knowledge, 2 to desire of understanding), and 5 to relational/integrative factors (i.e. relation, affiliation and/or integration)⁴. Generally speaking the group that scored highest was that of intrinsic motivation.

Extrinsic motivation

The group of extrinsic motivation scored an average mean of 4.03 out of 7 on the Likert scale. Five items were related to instrumental reasons, either by focusing on the utility of the language, or in relation to the respondents’ desire for career and economic enhancement⁵. The idea that Arabic “can provide more employment opportunities” (Q5) collected strong agreement (5.38). This factor turned out to be even more motivating than the opportunity for higher wages or more professional responsibility (Q6).

To be considered “an expert in migration or terrorism” (Q9) was the least endorsed reason for studying Arabic in this group (4.3), although not everybody agreed (the standard deviation (SD) was quite wide). Given that working with migrants was well appreciated (see below), respondents possibly disagreed with the proposed expertise in terrorism (see also the Q34 result).

Higher evaluations were given to the relevancy of Arabic “for world economy and finance” (Q11) (4.82), and especially for “working in the field

of international politics” (Q10), which scored the highest in this session (5.56). This highlights how the language related to international politics and diplomacy is a great requirement for these students.

Both the items of the circumstantial subscale (“I had a (second) FL as a degree requirement and had no other choice” (Q1) and Arabic “is easier to me, as I am already familiar with it” (Q3)) achieved extremely low means. Therefore, none of the students felt that they were forced to choose Arabic or saw it as a shortcut to achieve graduation. On the contrary, Arabic was freely decided upon with determination and this can explain the low rate of initial attrition and foretell a good deal of engagement, if motivation is correctly sustained.

Intrinsic motivation

The second scale was related to intrinsic motivation, i.e. studying the language for itself, for one’s inherent pleasure, curiosity, or interest in the activities one can do with the language. The average mean was 5.13. Respondents were very positive about both Arabic *per se* and about the pleasure of learning it: Arabic “is fascinating, exotic and less banal than other languages”⁶ (Q2) scored 5.67, whereas “I like learning a challenging language and being effective” (Q4) scored 5.09. In the students’ spontaneous beliefs, Arabic is an original education choice and strongly stimulating despite its fame as a ‘difficult’ language.

The motives related to the desire to acquire the ability to read texts were rated from middle to middle-high: reading press and other sources of information about the Arab world (Q17) raised the strongest enthusiasm (5.34), followed by reading classical or modern Arabic literature (Q15) and philosophical or religious works (Q16).

Studying Arabic to get to know its culture was also linked to empathy, desire for new awareness and discovery of different standpoints on reality: “Arabic is useful to understand other individuals/people’s perspective of the world” (Q13) scored the highest among all the items of the questionnaire (6.29, with a very low SD). The utility of Arabic for “better understanding the events of our times” (Q12), was also very well valued. The Mann Whitney test highlighted some difference in this regard between the BA and MA students (p .0424), with younger students displaying additional enthusiasm. These results suggest that teaching Arabic should never be detached from attentively teaching the related system of values, beliefs, heritage, and arts.

Relational/Integrative motivation

Relational/integrative motivation is used in this study as a very broad label for a set of motivational orientations, from cultural appreciation to willingness to explore the Arabic environment, and from developing a relationship with the Arab people to pursuing a (stronger) social affiliation or (re)acquisition of cultural identity. The items were in some cases more directly addressed to heritage learners, to whom a separate study will be devoted (forthcoming). The average mean of the integrative scale was 4.37. The interest for travelling to MENA (Q7) scored medium-high (4.57), but the students showed much less enthusiasm about changing their life setting and settling in an Arab country (Q8).

The decidedly positive attitude of the respondents toward encountering others was confirmed in 2 further items: “I would like to be able to meet new and different people” (Q14), which scored very high and the lowest SD of the entire questionnaire (1.1) and “I would like to talk to Arabic-speaking friends or relatives” (Q18).

The last item was Arabic “is useful to understand my family cultural or religious heritage” (Q19). It scored only 2.36 but this low rating was due to its restricted focus on the *family heritage*, that excluded the largest part of respondents. Table 8 and figure 8 show all these results in detail.

| Type | Motivational orientations | Mean | Median | SD |
|-------------------------------|--|------|--------|-------|
| Circumstantial m. | Requirement, no alternatives (Q1) | 1.29 | 1 | 0.875 |
| | Easiness, familiarity (Q3) | 2.15 | 1 | 2.014 |
| Extrinsic m. | More work opportunities (Q5) | 5.38 | 6 | 1.358 |
| | Better-paid job (Q6) | 4.75 | 5 | 1.547 |
| | Expertise in migration and terrorism (Q9) | 4.3 | 4 | 1.779 |
| | Relevancy for world politics (Q10) | 5.56 | 6 | 1.384 |
| | Relevancy for world economy (Q11) | 4.82 | 5 | 1.619 |
| Intrinsic m. | Fascination for the language (Q2) | 5.67 | 6 | 1.447 |
| | Challenge, self-efficacy (Q4) | 5.09 | 5 | 1.602 |
| | Understanding contemporary events (Q12) | 5.75 | 6 | 1.323 |
| | Understanding others' perspectives (Q13) | 6.29 | 7 | 1.125 |
| | Reading Arabic literature (Q15) | 4.22 | 4 | 1.797 |
| | Reading Arabic philosophy, or religion (Q16) | 3.61 | 3 | 1.889 |
| Relational/ Integrative m. | Reading Arabic press (Q17) | 5.34 | 6 | 1.547 |
| | Travelling to MENA (Q7) | 4.57 | 5 | 1.597 |
| | Settling in MENA (Q8) | 3.54 | 3 | 1.733 |
| | Meeting different people (Q14) | 6.27 | 7 | 1.1 |
| | Talking to friends/relatives (Q18) | 5.09 | 6 | 1.997 |
| | Family cultural/religious heritage (Q19) | 2.36 | 1 | 2.291 |

Table 8. Detailed results for the items that relate to the motivational orientations.

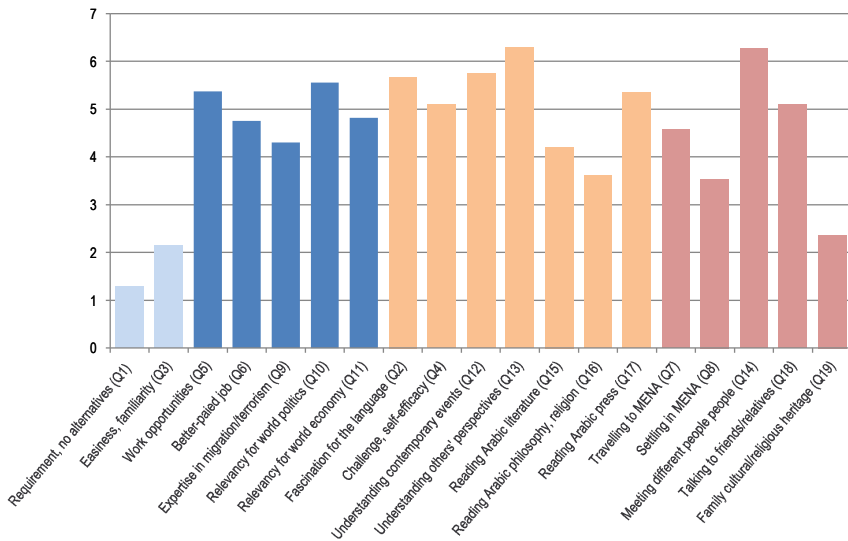


Figure 8. Means for the items that relate to the motivational orientations.

As for the differences in the means among subgroups of respondents, only rarely were these highlighted in this section. For example, there was no significant difference between male and female respondents. However, the secondary education received seemed to play an important role. In some cases, this was possibly due to the link between specific kinds of subgroups (such as the heritage learners) and the secondary schools they more frequently attended. In other cases (Q3, Q19), instead, the statistically different ratings were linked to the specific educational focus promoted by the schools attended. For example, students previously enrolled in Business or Tourism high schools were more strongly motivated to study Arabic because of its expected relevancy in the world economy (5.91 vs. the general 4.82, with $p .0088$). Conversely, students from schools where they were taught ancient Greek or Latin scored a lower mean in the integrative motivation scale (4.02 vs 4.44, with $p .0293$).

Professional Orientations

The second part of the questionnaire aimed at enquiring into the respondents' expectations about their future employment. This part of the survey is particularly relevant towards understanding what specific areas of

ASP are more urgent in view of the students' employment. 14 pre-selected items plus an open one were proposed to elicit the students' occupational preferences. The items can be grouped into the following sectors: internationalism (3), local mediation (3), tourism (2), business (2), translation and others.

The average score on the scale of internationalism, i.e. jobs as mediator at an international level, was 5.12. The first of the 3 items connected to this subscale was related to the world of media, such as newspapers, the Internet, and TV broadcasts (Q22), and it scored medium high (4.48). Both working "in the field of diplomacy or international politics" (Q23) and "for national/international institutions or organizations that operate in the Arab countries" (Q26) received high scores, respectively 5.12 and 5.83. The latter result also recorded the lowest SD (1.38).

Among the 3 jobs proposed for mediation at the local level (working "in the field of health care mediation" (Q27), "as a cultural mediator for State institutions (municipalities, settlement visa offices, and so forth)" (Q28), and "as a cultural mediator in schools, refugee centres, charities and so forth" (Q29)), it was the second one that scored the best (5.38).

The items related to tourism were rated 4.01 on average. A job "as a tour leader for Arab tourists in Italy, or Italian tourists in the Arab countries" (Q25) was better evaluated than working "in the field of tourist promotion, designing and promoting holiday packages from and to Arab countries" (Q24).

The average score for the business subscale was 3.83, with a much better performance of working "in companies trading with Arab countries (as sales personnel or a representative abroad)" (Q30; 4.74) rather than "in the promotion of *halāl* goods or goods for families of Arab origin living in Italy" (Q31).

Finally, all the remaining items had a very low rating, with the only exception of "interpreter, translator, or employee at a publishing house" (Q32), which was rated middle to high, at 4.7. Working "in the army or security" (Q34) was very little appreciated, probably because this is perceived as a sensitive area. A position in international finance (Q35), on the contrary, might seem attractive, especially for the role that Arabic is expected to play in the world economy, but that was not the case again, possibly because Islamic finance is still perceived as a hardly achievable market niche. The most striking result, however, was regarding the strategic sector of energy and oil (Q33), that

resulted in a mean of only 2.25, the lowest ever of this second section of the survey. The reason for this score may be a misconception of the real potential of this sector.

As for the free option, in four cases the field of education (as a teacher/professor of Arabic) was suggested as a desired professional position. Table 9 and Figure 9 show the results of all the single items.

| Type | Professional orientations | Mean | Median | SD |
|--------------------|---|------|--------|-------|
| International med. | Press, information (Q22) | 4.48 | 5 | 1.825 |
| | International politics and diplomacy (Q23) | 5.12 | 6 | 1.83 |
| | International organisations (Q26) | 5.83 | 6 | 1.38 |
| Local med. | Healthcare mediation (Q27) | 4.18 | 4 | 2.048 |
| | Mediation for State institutions (Q28) | 5.38 | 6 | 1.57 |
| | Mediation in schools, refugee centres (Q29) | 5.25 | 6 | 1.663 |
| Tourism | Promotion of tourism (Q24) | 3.83 | 4 | 1.952 |
| | Tour guide (Q25) | 4.19 | 4 | 1.96 |
| Trading | Trading with Arab countries (Q30) | 4.74 | 5 | 1.897 |
| | Promotion of goods (Q31) | 2.99 | 3 | 1.776 |
| Other | Interpreter, translator (Q32) | 4.70 | 5 | 1.894 |
| | Energy and oil (Q33) | 2.25 | 2 | 1.591 |
| | Armed forces, security (Q34) | 2.37 | 1 | 1.858 |
| | Financial consultant (Q35) | 2.6 | 2 | 1.879 |

Table 9. Detailed results for the items that relate to the professional orientations.

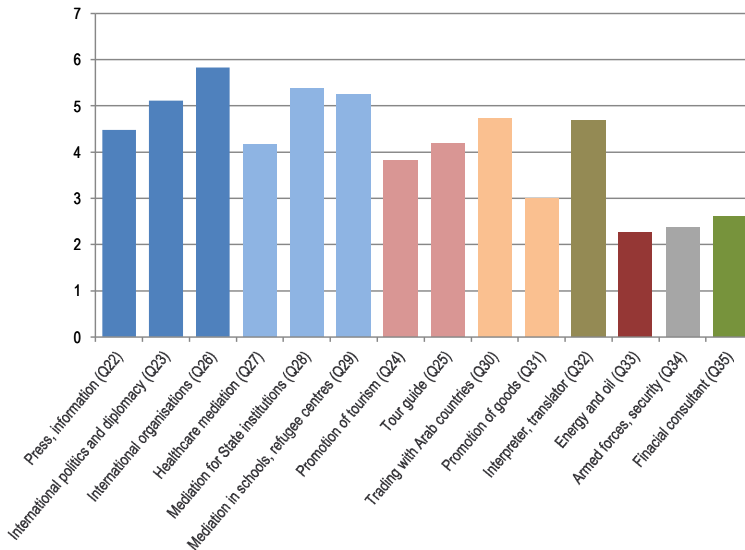


Figure 9. Means for the items that relate to professional orientations.

When it comes to inferential statistics, Mann Whitney tests and Kruskal-Wallis tests were carried out in order to highlight significant differences according to the following parameters: academic standing, degree level, gender and types of secondary schools.

Among the students attending the BA courses, a statistically significant difference with the Mann Whitney test was recorded for the professions related to tourism: at the beginning of their academic carrier the respondents were significantly more oriented to work both in the promotion of tourism and as tour guides. In the first case, the scores recorded were 4.06 for BA1 and BA2 respondents, and 3.02 for BA3 respondents (p .0011). In the second case, the means were even more divergent, as the average evaluation for working as a tour guide was 4.52 for the first subgroup and 3.36 for the second (p .0004).

The only other degree-level based difference was related to working in companies trading with Arab countries (Q30). This appealed considerably more to the MA respondents (5.46 vs 4.58, with p .0124).

As for the difference between genders, this was also present in some items. Female participants were more motivated to work for national or international institutions operating in the Arab countries (Q26), as cultural mediators in schools and refugee centres (Q29), or for State institutions (Q28). On the contrary, male respondents were only slightly more oriented to engage in the oil and energy sector (Q33). See Table 10 for the means and the differences between male and female subjects.

| Professional orientations | Male | Female | P value |
|---|------|--------|---------|
| International organisations (Q26) | 5.10 | 5.95 | .0297* |
| Mediation for State institutions (Q28) | 4.77 | 5.48 | .0212* |
| Mediation in schools, refugee centres (Q29) | 4.66 | 5.35 | .031* |
| Energy and oil (Q33) | 2.83 | 2.15 | .0174* |

(*statistically significant difference)

Table 10. Professional orientations: comparison of the means for male and female respondents.

The Kruskal-Wallis tests also highlighted differences in four professional orientations according to the types of secondary schools the respondents attended. For example, respondents studying ancient Greek and/or Latin, i.e. students considered to have a stronger secondary education track, were even less oriented towards employment in security or the armed forces

(Q34) (1.84 vs 2.49, with p .0338). Even more relevantly, a divergence was recorded for both the items connected to the area of business (Q30 and Q31), with p .0003 and p .0296 respectively. Students who attended Business or Tourism high schools and schools with technical or vocational curricula were more inclined to favour these jobs. They also had higher expectations about working in the field of finance (Q35) in comparison to their peers (p .0005). In short, schools for Tourism and Business or with technical or vocational curricula provided higher motivation for the related kinds of employment, thus confirming how the educational background can have a deep and long-term influence on one's academic and professional career.

ASP Students' needs

The aim of this study was to better understand the students' profile and detect their linguistic needs. Knowledge of the target audience, with their language acquisition background, learning peculiarities, motivational dimensions, professional aims constitutes the first step that the teaching process should take in a learner-centred perspective. Needs analysis of the students' professional orientations is a fundamental requirement (Long, 2005, 2013) especially in the perspective of Arabic for specific purposes (ASP). The students' requirements can help the language professionals give precedence to the development of teaching materials and syllabi for those variants of Arabic that require more urgent attention in the occupational perspective⁷.

Although professional needs and other specific features can vary according to place, context, target audience, time, and so forth, priorities and possibly general guidelines for teaching and material development should be agreed upon on a large scale as a common foundation for ASP. After a few decades of more or less successful attempts in facing circumscribed disciplinary needs (see Esseesy, 2017) via the autonomous development of teaching materials, ASP now seems to have reached a turning point. It has started defining itself, its goals, potentials, limits, perspectives, and professionals' roles, and entering the methodological debate with other LSPs that have a longer tradition and among which English, the "Tyrannosaurus Rex" in the LSP room (Upton, 2012), plays a special role.

Methodological implications can be drawn from this comparison. Being part of this wider category of LSP, ASP should also be rooted in the

communicative approach (Northcott, 2013). In this sense, it should be dominated by a pragmatic dimension that makes it “the language for getting things done... [in which] the practical application and use of the language overrides other aspects of language learning” (Harding, 2007: 6). As well as being accurate, ASP has to be effective.

Furthermore, ASP must start addressing a number of relevant issues that are presently being dealt with by the other languages. These are in particular:

- proportions of language and contents that must be taught (unknown contents cannot be taught in an unknown language)
- proportions of the skills involved
- focus on words/structures, text/purposes, genres, context, and interactions (Upton, 2012)
- use of professional authentic/pedagogical tasks
- degree of the specificity of the courses (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991) and actual meaning of the word “specificity” (see Huckin, 2003)
- focus on language strategies, rhetoric, and strategy-based methodologies
- responsibility of the teacher/freedom of the learners (Aly, 2017)
- degree of required teacher’s disciplinary/contents expertise
- degree of cooperation of teachers and disciplinary experts (Dudley-Evans, 2001)
- attention to adult learners (Golfetto, 2016).

At a more operative level, the theoretical reflection, which shapes and frames any decision, must be paired with more practical and operational concerns to answer the students’ needs in a scientific and appropriate manner. Thus syllabi, teaching methods, and materials that are coherent with the general theoretical framework should be consequently developed.

Needs analysis is fundamental in these other regards. Not only does it help to select the ASP variant that best meets the learner’s orientations (which have to be verified with information on the actual *post-lauream* employment rates, through permanent dialogue with professional associations, chambers of

labour and worker unions), but it is also applicable to the language itself, in order to understand which language items (vocabulary, structures, functions, genres and so forth) need to be taught. Once the target ASP variant and its items have been established, the syllabi can be designed at the local level according to the resources available in the institute (funding, contact hours, professionals) and the general curriculum supplied, on one side, and the learners' knowledge gaps (Esseesy, 2017: 195), on the other. As Brown (1995: 20; see also Trace et al., 2015: 6) highlights, when the goals and objectives of the course are established, all the further steps proceed in line with this: expected proficiency outputs; assessment methodologies; material selection, manipulation and development; teaching methods and techniques to be used. However, all this "is not a purely linear process": teaching must be systematic, but it also has to be open, flexible and ever-evolving. The materials must be tested in class in a research-action perspective, facing and solving the arising problems according to new emerging needs. The syllabi to devise can greatly vary regarding their contents, based on the teacher's intuition of greater appropriateness. Preference should be given to the task-based approach (Murphy, 2018), which literature for language teachers often presents as the most natural choice for LSP for various reasons: it is grounded on the communicative approach, as learners remain focused primarily on the communicative purpose rather than purely linguistic contents; it promotes real-world-like usage of language and strategies by setting the solution of real-world problems as goals; it promotes autonomy and increases the students' motivation and empowerment⁸. Despite the criticism of some who have objected against the suitability of syllabi based on tasks to young and novice learners, Robinson (2009) highlights how these can be sequenced independently from linguistic grading and in a way to minimize and then progressively increase the initial cognitive demand, in order to optimize "opportunities for attention allocation to language form" (303).

Finally, according to contemporary LSP prescriptions, the course design of ASP should turn to discourse-based and genre-based approaches. This means attention to rhetorical structures and functions in a real-usage and communicative perspective. And it also means an attentive selection of varied and representative textual genres to highlight the use of language in context (Swales, 2000) as well as their rhetoric and "new" rhetoric (Upton, 2012). Given the multiple purposes of genres, their socially and culturally related nature and understanding, and their modification over time, a simple product-based view of learning that encourages acquisition of fixed patterns and models of genres should be avoided. Conversely, the teacher should

allow for variation by combining the genre acquisition with “learning about genres”, i.e. genre awareness (Johns, 2008; Paltridge, 2011).

Conclusion

It is clearly not the sole students’ responsibility to determine what professional fields are most relevant to them. The decision of what varieties of Arabic should be taught is to be made also at different levels, according to the local community’s needs, national interests, actual vocation of the degree, and available resources. This, as well as the responsibility of providing syllabi appropriately devised for the goals, fall on the teaching personnel and syllabus planners. However, inquiry into the students’ needs analysis is a fundamental step towards a teaching approach centred on the learners. This survey, which was carried out on a selected population of university students representing a typical target for the teaching of ASP, has provided a wide picture of their professional demands. Additionally, it has also supplied information on other relevant issues that have hardly been explored in literature, such as information on these students’ learning background and features of educational continuities between their secondary and post-secondary education.

All the learners surveyed have proved certain of the usefulness of Arabic for their career. Their professional interests were partially divergent, but strongly oriented to such fields as international politics and diplomacy, press, mediation in administration offices and immigration centres, and - although to a lesser extent - to some areas of trading and tourism, and translation. The linguistic needs of each of these sectors can vary greatly from one to another as regards the appropriate vocabulary, the set of communicative functions, the genres knowledge and awareness, the rhetorical strategies, and other features, such as written skills or oral proficiency in relevant geographical variants that students must be taught in order to acquire appropriate professional skills. Each of them therefore requires specific attention and individually oriented curricula that need to be devised.

The professional prompt was not the sole that led the students to major in Arabic. One thing that all the learners shared was their interest for the target culture and an open and encouraging intercultural attitude. This cultural motivation is an even stronger stimulus than the professional one, and it

requires that any variety of Arabic must be taught alongside the Arabic cultural heritage, in both its educated and more popular features.

To conclude, the instrument used in this survey, which was readapted and expanded from previous studies and collected different kinds of motivations, was validated and proved effective in inquiring into the students' orientations, their educational background and learning needs. It can deservedly serve for future research carried out in this field.

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NOTES

¹ It should be borne in mind that "there is a major distinction between orientation and motivation. Orientation refers to reasons for studying a second language, while motivation refers to the directed, reinforcing effort to learn the language" (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991: 58). This paper will be using the types of motivations to denote the related orientations while not necessarily reflecting a specific level of motivation (Ryan, 1985); subsequently, the word "motivation(s)" might occasionally be used in its broader sense.

² At present, there was no compulsory attendance of classes for any of the degree programs.

³ One is indebted to Gardner (in particular 1985) for first reviewing the studies on motivation and attitudes and discussing different related issues. Noteworthy attempts to integrate different constructs and frameworks relating to the motivation were also carried out in particular by Noels et al. (2000), Noels (2001), MacIntyre et al. (2001), and Carreira (2005).

⁴ Literature on motivation and motivational constructs involve different fields, from psychology to education. The classical distinction is based on the idea of endogenous/exogenous dichotomy, which was followed by Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (1985). It is now assumed that the two kinds of motivation are located on a continuous dimension rather than being mutually exclusive. The articulation of the motivational construct used here mostly relies on Noels 2001 model. It gives though additional emphasis to the (relational/) integrative motivation.

⁵ An ultimate turning point in the studies on the instrumental motivation is Gardner and MacIntyre (1991).

⁶ Being Eurocentric in nature, the term “exotic” was clearly meant to be provocative and catalyze the students’ more naïve perceptions.

⁷ ASP items can be successfully integrated at an early stage, in case the target group of learners has peculiar requirements, the classes have definite goals and the available contact time is limited. Nevertheless, it is clearly not the author’s conviction that the standard curriculum of Arabic must be re-organized in any case and by any means.

⁸ Diglossia and variation make the concept of communication in Arabic more sophisticated. As communicative proficiency is not simply the ability to converse, to use a communicative approach and to promote real-world-like usage of the language do not mean to reduce Arabic to its sole colloquial (often dialectal) varieties. It is even more so when some linguistic fields of ASP are concerned, as those highlighted in the questionnaire results: in these cases, communication (either written or oral) is more likely to take place in the standard variety (MSA).