

Linguistic Immersion and Its Role in Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers: Middlebury College in the United States as a Model

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Abstract

This study explores the role of universities that teach Arabic as a second language in implementing immersion programs that extend beyond traditional curricula, classrooms, and instructors. By integrating cultural education, these programs provide learners with opportunities to engage directly with the Arabic language in authentic contexts, including social interactions, community participation, and cultural practices such as traditional clothing, customs, and celebrations. This approach emphasizes experiential learning, in which learners actively use the language in meaningful situations, fostering both linguistic proficiency and sociocultural understanding.

Moreover, language immersion encourages learners to internalize grammatical structures, vocabulary, and communicative strategies naturally while promoting motivation, autonomy, and confidence. The study also addresses challenges associated with immersion, including pronunciation, conversational skills, and language fluency, and proposes strategies to overcome these obstacles effectively. Furthermore, it highlights how situational and contextualized language experiences can complement or replace conventional textbook-based instruction, leading to more effective and lasting learning outcomes.

The findings indicate that students involved in immersion programs demonstrate higher levels of fluency, cultural awareness, and integration within Arabic-speaking communities. Finally, the study underscores the crucial role of educational institutions in designing and supporting comprehensive immersion experiences that enable learners not only to acquire language skills but also to develop a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of the Arabic-speaking world.

Keywords: *Language Immersion, Arabic as a Second Language, Cultural Integration, Experiential Learning, Fluency Development.*

Introduction

Drawing on personal experience gained while working in an Arabic language immersion program for non-native speakers at Middlebury College in the United States, this paper explores an intensive educational model designed to integrate learners fully into the Arabic language through academic coursework, daily activities, lectures, and a wide range of linguistic situations encompassing social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. In this model, language learning is transferred from the confined space of textbooks into the sphere of everyday lived experience. Consequently, the non-native Arabic learner exists entirely under the umbrella of Arabic both inside and outside the classroom—in restaurants, clubs, swimming pools, offices, holiday gatherings, evening events, and social activities within a closed university campus unified by a single linguistic and communicative context.

Linguistic immersion is regarded as one of the major branches of communicative linguistics. This field first emerged in 1947 at the University of Michigan through the work of Charles Fries and Robert Lado. Research efforts later continued in other institutions, such as University of Edinburgh in 1956 and the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington in 1957, with the aim of defining the domains included within this specialization.

In *An Overview of Applied Linguistics* (2013), Murcia and Schmitt note that the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) identified the principal areas of this field. Applied linguistics thus became concerned with the study of language, the ways in which it is learned and used to achieve communicative goals, and the search for solutions to real-world problems. Among the most prominent topics within this field are language and technology, second-language acquisition, translation and interpretation, and linguistic immersion. This raises several important questions: What is linguistic immersion? Does it have

historical roots? What are its types and strategies? And how can it contribute to solving communicative challenges?¹

Historically, immersion predates formal educational institutions. In earlier times, parents often sent their children to live among eloquent speakers in remote desert regions or isolated environments free from linguistic interference, where language—especially Classical Arabic—remained pure and unaffected. Ibn Khaldun discussed the concept of the “linguistic faculty” (*al-malakah al-lughawiyyah*), which individuals acquire through their environment by means of listening, communication, and repetition. He explains that a child raised among a speech community naturally acquires its language and internalizes its structures until he becomes capable of using it fluently, including its grammar and rhetorical features. Ibn Khaldun further argues that this acquisition is not primarily dependent on the direct study of grammatical rules, but rather on developing the linguistic faculty through hearing, speaking, and practical use. This is the same mechanism through which language is transmitted across generations.² He also states: “Languages are all faculties resembling crafts; they are faculties of the tongue for expressing meanings, and their perfection or deficiency depends upon the completeness or incompleteness of that faculty.”³

Linguistic Immersion: Linguistic and Terminological Definitions

Arabic lexicons distinguish between the terms *ghaṭs* (diving) and *ghams* (immersion). *Lisān al-‘Arab* states: “To dive and to immerse are one and the same,” and “He immersed him in water.”

Nevertheless, the term *immersion* carries broader and more comprehensive implications than *diving*, since immersion implies prolonged presence and continuity, whereas diving generally indicates brief submersion associated with water. Accordingly, linguistic immersion is more comprehensive than mere linguistic “diving.” *Al-Mu‘jam al-Wasīṭ* defines the submerged part of a ship as “the lower part that disappears beneath the water.”⁴

Thus, immersion in language signifies remaining, prolonged engagement, integration, and complete involvement within something. It is therefore more precise and comprehensive than related terms.⁵

Linguistic immersion rests upon two essential dimensions: the language itself and the duration of time spent engaging with it. It is a language-teaching principle based on total exposure to the target language for a specified period during which no language other than the target language is used.⁶

For this reason, many experts and specialists in teaching Arabic as a second language emphasize the necessity of allocating sufficient time for learners to achieve social immersion and psychological adaptation. Some scholars argue that instructional materials, worksheets, activities, and listening exercises should extend beyond textbook pages and become lived experiences. The target language should function as a tightly monitored medium of effective daily communication, supported by strict linguistic supervision and correction by teachers or more advanced learners. In accordance with Stephen Krashen’s theories, language must be used for authentic communication in order to become firmly established in learners’ minds before assignments, examinations, and assessments.

From the perspective of Abdelrahman Al-Haj Saleh, language is fundamentally a skill that develops only within its natural environment—an environment in which no sound or speech is heard except the target language. The learner must be immersed in its sounds⁷ so thoroughly that nothing else is

¹ Nadia Abrikat, “Linguistic Immersion in Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers,” Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Mohammed V University, *Al-Ma‘rifa Journal for Studies and Research*, Issue 11, December 2023, p. 619.

² See: *Muqaddimah*, edited by Abdullah Muhammad, Dar Al-Balghi – Halabouni, Al-Hidaya Library, 2004, p. 4.

³ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, 4th ed. Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-‘Ilmiyyah, vol. 1, p. 764.

⁴ Ibrahim Anis et al., *Al-Mu‘jam Al-Waseet*, 4th ed., Al-Shorouk International Library, Cairo, 2004, p. 173.

⁵ Houaria Jebli and Najat Toumache, “Linguistic Immersion and Its Importance in Teaching Standard Arabic: Preparatory Departments as a Model,” Master’s thesis, Ibn Khaldun University, 2022, p. 9.

⁶ Amna Manna and Yahya bin Yahya, “Linguistic Immersion and Its Impact on Language Teaching,” p. 65.

⁷ Abdelrahman El-Haj Saleh, *Research and Studies in Arabic Linguistics*, Mofam Publishing, Algeria, p. 143.

spoken or heard. This leads to the conclusion that immersion means placing the learner within an appropriate linguistic environment where only the target language is heard and spoken. Linguistic immersion enables learners to acquire accurate expression smoothly and naturally, much like foreign students learning a second language. Such immersion is considered essential for acquiring linguistic competence, as learners are prevented from hearing or speaking any language other than the one through which instruction is delivered.

Types of Linguistic Immersion

According to Nadia Ibreikat in her study *Linguistic Immersion in Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers*, immersion can be classified as follows:

A. Environmental Immersion

Natural Environment

This refers to a setting in which learners interact directly with native speakers of the target language, thereby acquiring both language and culture naturally and spontaneously, such as living with an Arab family.

Artificial or Virtual Environment

This refers to an environment deliberately designed by educational institutions through pedagogical strategies intended to immerse students in the target language community both inside and outside the classroom.

B. Age-Based Immersion

Early Immersion

Begins in kindergarten, where the mother tongue is postponed for several years while the second language is introduced as the primary medium of instruction.

Partial Early Immersion

Both the first and second languages are used as instructional tools from the beginning of schooling, as seen in countries such as Morocco where Modern Standard Arabic and French coexist in education.

Late Immersion

Occurs during secondary education, similar to the introduction of foreign languages such as English or Spanish into school curricula across many Arab countries.

C. Immersion Programs in the United States and Elsewhere

Partial Immersion Programs

Students spend only part of their time learning through the second language.

Full Immersion Programs (100%)

Learners spend all their time using and learning the second language.

Bilingual Programs

Linguistic minorities are immersed within the majority language community while one language remains the primary medium of instruction.

Two-Way Immersion

This is the most widespread model in the United States and incorporates two languages within the immersion system. However, the researcher's experience at Middlebury College demonstrated a stricter model in which students signed a "language pledge" prohibiting the use of their mother tongue (English) on campus. English use was permitted only during the first four weeks of the beginner level before students formally committed to the pledge.

Middlebury Language Schools as a Model

The summer program at Middlebury Language Schools in the United States is considered one of the most prominent models of intensive linguistic immersion. The program usually lasts between seven and eight weeks during the summer and aims to enable learners to acquire a foreign language rapidly through complete integration into a single-language environment.

The program follows an intensive system of study in which students complete the equivalent of a full academic year of language instruction within a short period of time. The curriculum includes daily classes in various language skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing, in addition to daily assignments and group projects. Teaching methods are also based on interaction and continuous



practice through discussions, presentations, and practical activities rather than traditional instructional methods. One of the important features of some language programs, especially Arabic, is that instructors are often native speakers of the language, which provides learners with an authentic linguistic model that helps them acquire proper pronunciation and accurate language use in natural contexts. This factor enhances the quality of immersion and strengthens the cultural dimension alongside the linguistic one.

The program is also distinguished by the diversity of its students' educational motivations. Some study the language for academic purposes, such as pursuing graduate studies or conducting scientific research, while others seek to develop their language skills for professional purposes or for careers that require proficiency in the language. Others participate out of personal or cultural interest. This diversity creates a rich educational environment characterized by interaction and the exchange of experiences.

Within this comprehensive linguistic immersion model, learning is not limited to classroom instruction; rather, it extends to every aspect of daily life on campus. This structure is designed to make the target language the primary—and almost exclusive—means of communication throughout the entire period of residence.

Among the most prominent academic activities accompanying classroom instruction is what is known as “Wednesday Talk,” an informal weekly gathering organized on campus that allows students to discuss cultural and social topics in the target language within an interactive atmosphere away from the pressure of the classroom. These sessions are often attended by a well-known invited guest speaker from outside the institution. In addition, the program offers extended office hours during which instructors dedicate extra time outside official working hours to help students overcome linguistic difficulties and review written and oral assignments.

Furthermore, the program is rich in daily student and cultural activities, including artistic performances, theatrical productions, group discussions, and sports events. All of these activities are designed to be conducted in the target language so that the language becomes a means of social interaction rather than merely a tool for academic learning.

The campus environment in these programs is distinguished by being transformed into a fully integrated linguistic and cultural setting in which the target language is used in every aspect of daily life, from signs in the hallways to the names of classrooms and facilities. Even everyday spaces such as the library, classrooms, and cafeteria operate within a unified linguistic identity that reinforces complete immersion.

Another prominent cultural aspect is the organization of a weekly Arabic dinner in Arabic language programs, where students gather for a communal meal featuring traditional Arabic dishes. During these gatherings, the linguistic and cultural context is intentionally used to enhance learning. This dinner is not merely a dining activity, but rather a cultural experience that combines language, food, and social interaction in an atmosphere that reflects the authentic culture of the language being studied.

Thus, the program is transformed into a fully integrated educational and living environment in which academic study and daily life are intertwined within a single framework, making linguistic immersion a comprehensive experience that simultaneously encompasses language, culture, and social interaction. As previously mentioned, the program also implements the principle of the “language pledge,” whereby students are required to use only the target language throughout their entire period of residence, both inside and outside the classroom, including in university housing and daily activities. This contributes to the creation of a complete immersion environment that significantly accelerates the process of language acquisition.

Overall, the program provides an intensive and comprehensive educational experience that combines rigorous academic study with student life within a closed linguistic environment, making it an advanced model of effective linguistic immersion. See the table below.



Domain	Activity	Description
Academic / Interactive	Wednesday Talk	An informal weekly gathering for discussing cultural and social topics in the target language.
Academic / Educational Support	Intensive Office Hours	Additional hours provided by instructors to assist students with comprehension, revision, and error correction.
Cultural / Social	Student Activities	Discussions, artistic and theatrical performances, and cultural events conducted in the target language, including the talent show.
Sports / Recreational	Sports Activities	Activities and games designed to enhance linguistic communication in non-academic contexts.
Environmental / Linguistic	Campus Environment	Use of the target language in directional signs, facilities, and daily communication across campus.
Cultural	Arabic Dinner	A communal meal featuring traditional Arabic dishes used to enhance cultural and linguistic interaction among students.

Linguistic immersion programs also rely on a range of educational strategies aimed at supporting language learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom, whether inside or outside the university, by enabling learners to practice the language in a natural manner that helps reinforce what they have learned. Language learning is therefore not limited to the memorization of information and grammatical rules; rather, it also includes the practical application of speaking, writing, and communicating with others, thereby providing learners with authentic and diverse linguistic opportunities.

Among the most important of these strategies is the repetition and review of lessons, through which foreign learners are given multiple opportunities to revisit what they have learned in a natural and systematic way. This process enhances their understanding of linguistic information and grammatical structures while developing their ability to use them effectively in different communicative situations. In addition, dialogue-based instruction is considered one of the most effective strategies in this context. Dialogue is not merely a means of communication between two individuals; rather, it is regarded as an educational tool that goes beyond the exchange of speech to include the acquisition of linguistic, social, and cultural values and skills associated with communicative interaction.

Immersion programs in educational institutions have also adopted a range of practical strategies to achieve their objectives. One of the most important of these is the linguistic and cultural partner strategy, which represents an immersion component in programs that do not follow a fully intensive model. This strategy is based on employing native speakers of the language—usually university students—as companions for learners. The linguistic partner accompanies the learner outside official class hours and communicates with them exclusively in Arabic, thereby creating a natural communicative environment that enables the learner to practice the language continuously and develop the ability to use it fluently in everyday life situations.

According to the description provided by Middlebury Language Schools of its intensive summer program, assessment and testing constitute an essential component of the linguistic immersion

experience. The evaluation process is conducted through several interconnected stages: the placement test upon admission, weekly assessments, and finally the exit examination. At the beginning of the program, students undergo placement tests designed to determine their linguistic proficiency accurately upon arrival. These tests usually assess multiple skills such as reading, writing, and listening, in addition to oral interviews that evaluate students' speaking abilities and communicative interaction. The results of these assessments are used to place each student in the appropriate academic level within the program, ensuring that the learning process remains balanced and effective from the very first day.

During the summer session, however, assessment is not limited to traditional examinations. Rather, the program relies on continuous weekly oral tests and evaluations. Students are assessed regularly through class participation, their ability to engage in dialogue, oral presentations, discussions, and daily assignments. This system is intended to ensure the continuous use of the language within the immersion environment, rather than restricting language use to formal examinations alone.

At the end of the program, students undertake a final exit assessment aimed at measuring the extent of the linguistic progress they have achieved during the immersion period. This evaluation typically includes fluency in speaking, listening comprehension, and the ability to express oneself both orally and in writing. Furthermore, students' final proficiency levels are compared with their initial placement results in order to measure the amount of progress achieved throughout the summer program.

Overall, the assessment system at Middlebury College is based on a fundamental principle: language is not merely tested, but practiced on a daily basis. Consequently, examinations are integrated into the broader immersion experience, which combines learning with continuous application throughout university life.

In this regard, Addison argues that immersion is important for distinguishing between different social communities, meaning that the application of immersion helps differentiate societies and their respective languages. He also emphasizes the importance of social language and the necessity of understanding it, stating: "The facts of language can deepen one's understanding of society, just as it is difficult to find characteristics that distinguish a society as clearly as its language does."⁸

This means that understanding the nature of language and its unique foundations within each society contributes to a deeper understanding of that society itself, since every community is distinguished by its own language, which reflects its identity and culture. Accordingly, linguistic immersion is considered one of the most effective methods of language acquisition because of its important role in creating a sound linguistic environment capable of developing learners' Arabic language skills.

In other words, immersion creates a healthy linguistic atmosphere that contributes to the development of learners' Arabic abilities, whether in pronunciation, accent, or even the use of Modern Standard Arabic. Students at Middlebury College in the United States, for example, are exposed to a wide range of pronunciation styles and accents due to the diversity of national backgrounds among their instructors, all of whom are native speakers of Arabic.

Furthermore, Jibril Bouzouina⁹ discusses in his article the importance of linguistic immersion in teaching both second languages and even the mother tongue. According to him, immersion achieves the following:

- It accelerates the learning and teaching of a second language within a short period of time and with high efficiency.
- It enriches the various skills of second-language learners.
- It enables learners to connect what they hear and learn with their own personal experiences, thereby increasing their self-confidence.

Mechanisms of Linguistic Immersion and the Role of the Teacher

The mechanisms of linguistic immersion are based on a set of fundamental principles that ensure language acquisition occurs naturally and effectively. Among the most important of these principles are listening, repetition, and practice. Continuous exposure to the language in its natural contexts enables learners to become familiar with its sounds and structures and to internalize them spontaneously. Repetition, on the other hand, contributes to reinforcing these linguistic inputs in

⁸ Addison, *Sociolinguistics*, translated by Mahmoud Abbad, 2nd ed., Cairo: Alam Al-Kutub, 1990, p. 16.

⁹ Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada, *How Languages Are Learned*, translated by Ali Ahmad Shaaban, 1st ed., Giza, 2014, p. 63.

memory and strengthening the learner's ability to recall and use them correctly. Practice represents the applied dimension that allows learners to employ what they have heard and repeated in authentic communicative situations, thereby enhancing linguistic fluency and making language acquisition more stable and effective.

According to the researcher Nadia Ibreikat, the teacher's role is central to establishing the foundations of linguistic immersion, as the teacher contributes significantly to the learning of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and phonetic features. The teacher is regarded as the primary instrument in refining the learner's motor, social, psychological, and linguistic skills. Therefore, teachers are required to possess specific competencies that enhance the learner's ability to use Modern Standard Arabic accurately and effectively.

1. Articulation and Pronunciation of Sounds

The teacher must possess accurate pronunciation and should give each sound its proper value. A speaker cannot produce sounds correctly unless they possess a healthy and proper speech apparatus. It is therefore essential for the teacher to be free from speech disorders and to demonstrate correct pronunciation.

2. Clarity and Projection of Voice

Clarity of voice refers to the distinctness of pronunciation, and the teacher must be able to control the volume of their voice in order to facilitate comprehension. Clear speech enhances students' ability to hear and understand the linguistic content being presented, thereby increasing their effectiveness in comprehending linguistic concepts.

3. Calmness and Deliberation in Speech

Calmness and deliberation in pronunciation refer to speaking slowly and avoiding rushing through sounds and words, which helps learners understand what they hear. This also highlights the importance of giving listeners sufficient time to absorb information. As one scholar stated: "In his speech, he does not allow the listener enough time to understand what is being heard... thus boredom overtakes the listener, who eventually stops paying attention." This indicates that brief pauses are important in enabling learners to comprehend and interact with the material being presented.

4. The Ability to Modulate Vocal Intonation

The ability to modulate vocal intonation refers to controlling the tone of voice during speech according to different expressive modes, thereby helping listeners understand the meanings and intentions conveyed in sentences. As Zalmad Abu Zira explains: "The interrogative sentence differs in its intonation from the imperative sentence, and this in turn differs from the tone of a sentence expressing hope."

Accordingly, teachers must pronounce every sentence correctly, including the tones associated with questions, exclamations, and other forms of expression, so that learners are able to understand the tonal distinctions that contribute to the clarity of meaning. Therefore, successful teachers should vary their teaching methods by altering the delivery of their voice, changing their gestures and movements, and varying vocal intonation in order to maintain students' attention, stimulate their interest, and sustain their concentration while explaining linguistic material that requires familiarity with the sciences of language.

For this reason, teachers should diversify the tones of their voice during instruction so that learners do not lose focus on the intended objectives and purposes of the lesson. Teachers must therefore possess competencies in both receptive and productive language skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion, linguistic immersion is considered one of the most successful approaches to teaching Arabic to non-native speakers because it enables learners to move genuinely from theoretical learning to practical application within integrated real-life contexts. The experience of Middlebury College has confirmed the success of this model, as it succeeded in achieving remarkable linguistic progress among students within a relatively short period due to the intensive linguistic environment and continuous interaction.

This experience has also highlighted the importance of fully immersing learners in the target language through temporarily disconnecting them from their mother tongue and relying on the second language as the sole means of communication and thought. This approach contributes significantly to

accelerating language acquisition, enhancing fluency, and building self-confidence, free from mental translation and dependence on the first language.

Accordingly, the success of this model emphasizes the necessity of adopting linguistic immersion programs in the teaching of Arabic, while focusing on creating a closed linguistic environment that supports the continuous use of the language. Such an environment contributes to achieving authentic and profound acquisition of the Arabic language among learners.

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