

## THE MULTIPLICITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS: CHALLENGES IN ATTAINING 'ARABIC LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG BLACK AND LATINO AMERICAN MUSLIM CONVERTS

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the complex challenges faced by Black and Latino American Muslim converts to Islām when learning 'Arabic as a second or additional language. Drawing on historical analyses of the slave trades, sociological perspectives on post-1965 'Arab-Black American relations, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Critical Race Theory, this paper contends that historical legacies and contemporary social dynamics converge to create unique pedagogical and psychological barriers for these learners. Based on the author's unpublished dissertation research, which employed a Transformative Mixed-Methods Phenomenological Approach, the synthesis of data sources reveals challenges such as psychological barriers stemming from historical trauma, strained intergroup relations, issues of identity and belonging within Muslim communities, potential biases in educational settings, and the complexities of 'Arabic diglossia. The article further explores the intricate navigation of intersecting racial, ethnic, and religious identities. The author describes these profound psychological barriers as a "Multiplicity of Consciousness," an expansion of W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness. This research sheds light on this critical phenomenon, establishing its significance for future inquiry and suggesting avenues for fostering more inclusive, effective, and equitable 'Arabic language learning environments within Islāmic contexts.*

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**Keywords:** *'Arabic Language Learning, Black and Latino Muslims, Identity, Multiplicity of Consciousness, Social Justice in Education.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last six decades, there has been a notable increase in the number of Black and Latino individuals converting to Islām in the United States (Smith, 2014). Many of these converts seek to deepen their understanding of Islām by learning 'Arabic, the language of the Qur'ān, and essential Islāmic texts (About Islām, n.d.; Amin, 2017). Although acquiring proficiency in 'Arabic can be rewarding, these converts are likely to face unique challenges from historical legacies and contemporary social dynamics. Consequently, the following research questions were developed to guide the study of this phenomenon:

- Which affective variables significantly inform the 'Arabic language acquisition process of BALM converts?
- How does cultural bias influence their acquisition process?
- What attitudes and experiences prevail among BALM converts while learning 'Arabic?
- How does quantitative data elucidate qualitative findings?

This article examines how the challenges these learners encounter may give rise to a distinct experiential phenomenon

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compared to other 'Arabic language learners. It explores the phenomenon of Black and Latino Muslim (BALM) converts to Islām pursuing 'Arabic as an additional language in a post-1965, United States context, positing that intersecting historical, social, political, and psychological contexts and their unique histories add complexity to the language acquisition process. It seems undeniable that the legacies of the 'Arab Slave Trades (AST) and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (TAST) would hauntingly shape the perceptions, lived experiences, and motivations of these converts. For Black Muslims, the AST established historical precedents for future African exploitation, weakened their societies, and fostered distrust toward 'Arab culture and language (Gordon, 1989; Segal, 2001; Gomez, 2005). Consistent with language acquisition theories, such as that of Krashen's (1982), the memory of 'Arab involvement in the enslavement of African ancestors can create psychological barriers and anxieties associated with learning the language of a people implicated in their ancestors' oppression and the disruption of their heritage cultures. This awareness can significantly affect motivation, engagement, and the overall learning experience.

Similarly, while Latino Muslim converts may not directly experience the historical trauma of the TAST or AST in the same way, they may still be impacted by broader racial dynamics and the lingering effects of such histories. For example, the TAST had profound implications for Caribbean societies, shaping cultural identities and social structures. Latinos must also navigate their unique cultural ties to 'Arabic through the legacy of Al-Andalus—a historic Muslim-ruled region in the Iberian Peninsula that was primarily 'Arabic-speaking (King & Perez,

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2015). Furthermore, they encounter marginalization within Muslim communities that are influenced by the 'Arabs' cultural norms, entrenched perceptions of race (King & Perez, 2015), and a conflicting sense of identity (Anzaldúa, 1987). This marginalization adds another layer of complexity to their engagement with 'Arabic. Thus, both groups grapple with identity negotiation and racial biases in 'Arabic learning environments. These experiences can create emotional barriers, such as dissonance and resentment, which can complicate their engagement with 'Arabic (Krashen, 1982).

Moreover, socio-political dynamics introduced by the Immigration and Nationality Act (U.S. Congress, 1965) led to an influx of 'Arab and South Asian Muslims to the U.S., reshaping the Muslim community (Smith, 2014). The arrival of these immigrants often created biases and cultural misunderstandings that strained relationships between the immigrants and the Black Muslims who were spearheading the Civil Rights Movement, which enabled these new immigrants to succeed in America (Abd'al-Rahim, 2024; Curtis, 2009).

Culturally responsive programs are essential for addressing these pedagogical challenges (Gay, 2000). Recognizing historical narratives, fostering inclusive learning environments, and providing relatable role models are critical actions for enabling Black and Latino Muslim (BALM) converts to connect with 'Arabic as part of their spiritual, cultural, and linguistic journeys.

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## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The phenomenon of Black and Latino Muslim (BALM) converts in America acquiring 'Arabic as a second or additional language (L2) is embedded in a complex nexus of historical legacies, social dynamics, and psychological factors. This review begins with an overview of the historical context of the phenomenon, followed by a summary of research related to the psychological and sociological implications of the phenomenon.

### 2.1 Historical Context and the Psychological Legacy of Slavery

For over a century, scholars have discussed how the historical impacts of the 'Arab Slave Trades (AST) and Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (TAST) continue to influence contemporary experiences of identity for Black and Latino Americans (Du Bois, 1903; Said, 1978). The impacts of the AST and TAST left enduring psychological scars and ramifications on African diasporic populations. Early seminal works, such as W.E.B. Du Bois's (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk*, detail the impact and cultural ramifications of slavery. Similarly, Edward Said's (1978) work, *Orientalism*, explains the marginalization of non-Western cultures, which influences the perceptions and experiences of BALM converts seeking to learn 'Arabic. Na'im Akbar (1996), a prominent figure in African-centered psychology, explores the effects of slavery on the minds of Black Americans, positing that the systemic trauma and dehumanization of enslavement created maladaptive psychological patterns (such as internalizing stereotypes) that persist in many Black individuals across generations. Dr. Joy DeGruy's (2017) work introduces the Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) theory as a

framework to explain the social and psychological issues experienced by Black Americans due to chattel slavery and systemic oppression. Benjamin P. Bowser and Aimé Charles-Nicolas (2021) co-edited a compilation of essays by various scholars examining the psychological legacies of slavery, exploring themes such as intergenerational trauma, the impact on identity and family structures, Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), the epigenetic transmission of trauma, and the historical context of mental health disparities among Black Americans.

Historians like Paul Lovejoy (2000) and Davis Eltis and David Richardson (2010) expand on these perspectives, providing comprehensive analyses of slavery's transformative impact on native social structures, including those in the Caribbean, which were significantly altered by the slave trades. These historical events manifest as lasting psychological barriers—traumas that affect learners' confidence, identity, and emotional readiness to acquire a new language (Fanon, 1963; Ibrahim, 1999). For BALM converts, their psychological barriers are closely related to their historical trauma.

## **2.2 Sociological Perspectives on Post-1965 “Arab-Black American Relations**

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Celler Act (U.S. Congress, 1965), significantly altered America's cultural landscape by abolishing the existing quota systems that granted visas mainly to European immigrants (Smith, 2014). This Act led to an influx of well-educated and accomplished immigrants from previously excluded Muslim-majority countries, who arrived in search of opportunities in

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education and employment (Flodin-Ali, 2023). According to Sherman A. Jackson (2005), this influx occurred in a context where Black Muslim communities were already established, and Islām was being perceived as a liberatory and inclusive theology well-suited to the needs of Black Americans. Jackson observed that immigrant Muslims, particularly native 'Arabic speakers, were often viewed in American society as the definitive standard for "authentic" Islāmic beliefs and practices within the American context. In addition, Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) theory of Language as Symbolic Power illustrates how dominant norms in language education marginalize non-dominant learners and reproduce power relations, which can create tensions within the Muslim community.

The period following the passing of the Hart-Celler Act was a time when Black and Latino Americans were challenging their lack of equal access to the same opportunities that America was providing to the new immigrant. The relationships between the new Muslim immigrants and established Black and Latino Muslim communities became noticeably strained due to conflicting interests. Self-identified anti-Islām Black scholars, such as Ronald Karenga (1993) and Molefi Asante (1987), appeared to exploit these dynamics, pointing out that historical marginalization and intergroup mistrust in Islām create unique obstacles for converts who must navigate traditional racial narratives alongside emerging diasporic identities (Hall, 2015). Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) Intersectionality Framework further illustrates how these overlapping identities can intensify marginalization in educational and social settings.

### 2.3 The Impact of Affective Variables

Emotions significantly affect how learners process additional language (L2) input. Heidi Dulay and Marina Burt (1977) introduced the concept of an Affective Filter, a psychological barrier created by certain emotional states that reduces receptiveness to L2 input. Stephen Krashen (1982; Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982) supported this perspective, emphasizing the importance of considering learner emotions in curriculum design. His Input Theory (1985) states that learners require emotional receptiveness to process L2 input. Krashen also endorsed Chomsky's (1965) idea of a Language Acquisition Device (LAD), referring to it as the "internal language processor." He noted that in L2 acquisition, "input is the essential environmental factor, and an internal language processor is the essential non-environmental factor for L2 acquisition" (Krashen, 1985, pp. 2-3). He further argues that a high affective filter prevents input from being stored in long-term memory due to a "mental block" (Bahrani, 2011). Rod Ellis (1994) highlights that emotional states are dynamic and continuously influence responses to learning. Research by Kubota and Lin (2009) indicates that acquiring a language is a psychological process shaped by a learner's emotional readiness. Additionally, Marc Brackett (2019) noted that learner emotions specifically influence attention, focus, and memory.

When BALM converts learn "Arabic, psychological barriers stemming from historical trauma, modern interactions, and the current socio-political environment can heighten challenges in L2 acquisition. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis explains how emotional factors, such as language anxiety,

insufficient motivation, and low self-confidence, obstruct this process. Fanon (1963) argues that the psychological scar of colonialism undermines self-confidence.

Other theorists have also explored L2 motivation: Abraham Maslow (1943) suggests that fulfilling strong psychological needs drives motivation, while Reza Pishghadam and others (2019) link it to extrinsically rewarded behaviors. Abbas Gilakjani and colleagues (2012) build on Gardner and Lambert's (1972) concept of integrative motivation, emphasizing the importance of "cultural contexts that influence learners' attitudes and motivation to learn a culturally distinct language" (p. 132).

## 2.4 The Role of Culture

Ruth and John Useem (1963) define culture as "the learned and shared behavior of a community of interacting human beings" (Useem & Useem, 1963, p. 169). Highlighting culture's role in human existence, Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allāh (2009), states,

Humankind is, first and foremost, the 'cultural animal.' Culture weaves together the fabric of what we value and need to know—beliefs, morality, expectations, skills, and knowledge—integrating them into effective customary patterns (p. 13).

Culture shapes educational experiences and second language acquisition (SLA). The learners' cultural backgrounds and values influence their learning approaches and interactions (Kramsch, 1998; Norton, 2013). Acculturation studies (Berry, 2005, 2007) show how learners reconcile their heritage culture (C1) with the target language culture (C2), leading to either assimilation, integration, separation, or marginalization. Geneva Gay (2018)

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and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) stress culturally responsive teaching, leveraging students' cultural perspectives. Bonny Norton (2013) notes cultural factors impact learners' investment in L2 and evolving identities, while Claire Kramsch (1998) claims learning a language means adopting its culture and worldview. Addressing the connection between culture, identity, and education is essential for equitable language learning.

### **2.5 The Navigation of Intersecting Identities**

The navigation of intersecting racial, ethnic, and religious identities (Flores-González, 2002; King & Perez, 2015; Kramsch, 1998; Norton, 1995, 2013) is central to understanding the challenges faced by Black and Latino Muslim (BALM) convert populations. The works of Du Bois (1903) and Crenshaw (1989, 1991) emphasize that the compounded effects of historical marginalization and contemporary discrimination create a complex identity duality, or “double consciousness.” BALM converts must reconcile their experiences of racial and cultural oppression with their new religious affiliations. For the BALM convert, the resulting identity negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 2005) often results in a “multiplicity of consciousness” (Abd'al-Rahim, 2024) where race, ethnicity, faith, and national identity compete to inform group belonging and language acquisition (Anzaldúa, 1987; Norton, 1995, 2013; Ting-Toomey, 2005; Abd'al-Rahim, 2024). Studies by Norton (2013) and Anzaldúa (1987) demonstrate that tension and ambiguity often mark this complex identity negotiation. Excessive or frequent identity negotiation can lead

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to “identity chaos,” resulting in individuals with a marginal sense of identity and no moral center (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Norton (2013) also notes that constructing identity in new linguistic and cultural contexts often requires reconciling conflicting narratives surrounding race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion. This reconciliation may be further complicated by educational biases that occur when cultural competence is lacking (Cummins, 1981; Hall, 2015). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) highlights how systemic biases infiltrate educational settings, resulting in low expectations and limited support, which, in turn, exacerbate intragroup alienation. Ofelia Garcia (2009) argues that bilingual programs often overlook the unique needs of learners with complex identities, creating a “double bind” where linguistic and socio-emotional challenges intersect.

Previous research highlights the difficulties that BALM converts face while learning “Arabic as an additional language. The legacy of slavery, along with complex intergroup dynamics and systemic educational biases, presents significant challenges to language acquisition. Historical analyses, sociological insights, and critical language theories provide valuable context for understanding these challenges.

## **2.6 Theoretical Frameworks**

Stephen Krashen’s (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, rooted in the work of Noam Chomsky (1965), provides a critical framework for understanding how certain emotional factors hinder additional language (L2) acquisition. Chomsky posits that humans are born with a psychological Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Krashen extends this idea, describing an

“affective filter” in the LAD that prevents learners from fully processing comprehensible language input, acting as a screen that determines how much of the L2 becomes part of the learner’s developing language system (Krashen, 1982). This concept is particularly relevant for Black and Latino Muslim (BALM) converts who may experience compounded stressors due to their intersecting identities (Flores-González, 2002; King & Perez, 2015; Kramsch, 1998; Norton, 1995, 2013).

For BALM converts, learning ‘Arabic involves navigating a language that carries the weight of aspirational spirituality, historical oppression, and symbolic exoticness. Over time, racial, ethnic, and cultural biases become embedded in educational practices and can impede the language learning process. Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1991) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) provide lenses for examining these systemic inequities within society and language education. Through a cross-disciplinary intellectual approach, both frameworks examine how social conceptions of race and ethnicity shape society. The essential ideas behind Critical Race Theory (CRT) include the following (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017):

- Race is not a natural, biologically grounded feature of physically distinct subgroups of human beings but a socially constructed (culturally invented) category.
- Those in power create categories of race to oppress and exploit others.

- Racism is not rare or aberrational; it is the norm of modern life.

Like Critical Race Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) challenges assumptions about societal norms and practices. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) focuses on how people and systems use language, suggesting that language is not neutral but is imbued with historical and political meanings and power (Fairclough, 2012; hooks, 2000; Collins, 2000). Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of Language as Symbolic Power elucidates how the dominant cultural capital may marginalize the linguistic practices and identities of minority groups. Jim Cummins (1981) further argues that the failure of educational systems to account for cultural diversity results in lower academic achievement and increased affective barriers for minority learners.

The core principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000; Banks, 2001) provide a framework for examining the cultural responsiveness of teaching materials, strategies, and environments. These principles encourage educators to acquire knowledge about student cultures, develop materials that reflect the diversity of students and society, utilize culturally relevant resources, create inclusive and supportive classroom environments, adopt culturally congruent instructional strategies, foster cross-cultural communication, and challenge cultural inequities in education. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) focuses on the related concept of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, introducing the need for learners to develop the cultural competence and critical consciousness necessary for academic success in a diverse society. Geneva

Gay (2000) expands on Ladson-Billings's research, specifically concentrating on developing teaching strategies to address these issues. In contrast, James A. Banks's (2001) work focuses on the need for comprehensive multicultural curricular reform.

The author also draws on her unpublished dissertation, which explores the 'Arabic language acquisition process of BALM converts in a Western context (Abd'al-Rahim, 2024). The dissertation research is guided by Kincheloe & McLaren's (2005) description of critical inquiry theory as a "transformative endeavor unembarrassed by the label 'political' and unafraid to consummate a relationship with emancipator [sic] consciousness" (p. 305). Kincheloe and McLaren strongly align critical theory with a Transformative Paradigm (Mertens, 2007, 2010, 2021), framing all critical theory research as forms of inquiry that are transformative and dedicated to social change. This research model addresses social justice issues and promotes positive change for marginalized groups (Mertens, 2010). It is distinguished by an axiology of cultural respect, an ontology that acknowledges the consequences of privilege, a collaborative epistemology grounded in trust, and a dialogic, mixed-methods methodology (Mertens, 2017).

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a transformative, mixed-methods phenomenological approach (T-MMPR) (Greene, 2007; Mertens, 2010, 2021; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) to investigate the "Arabic language acquisition experiences of Black and Latino Muslim (BALM) converts in the United States in a post-1965 context. The T-MMPR methodology, which integrates principles from both phenomenological and

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transformative paradigms, was chosen to address an unexplored topic while aiming to promote educational equity (Contreras-Villalobos et al., 2024). This approach grounds the research in the learners' lived experiences, intending to shed light on the phenomenon while advocating for systemic change.

The study employed a single-phase, exploratory, non-experimental design, integrating quantitative (QN) survey data with qualitative (QL) interview findings. The survey involved 268 respondents, and in-depth interviews were conducted with eleven purposefully selected participants. Although primarily descriptive, the QN data were analyzed to enhance and contextualize the QL findings. The qualitative study consisted of interviews with eleven participants, including seven Muslim converts and four adult children of converts. Four women and seven men participated. All four Latino participants had actively engaged with Black Muslim communities following their conversions, which was typical for that period.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format, utilizing predetermined questions; however, participants interpreted the questions' intent based on their own experiences and perspectives. Participant anonymity was maintained. The researcher analyzed the interview transcripts using the Moustakas Phenomenological Framework (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120–122). This process involved identifying invariant constituents—key, non-repetitive, non-overlapping elements consistent across participant experiences—and organizing them into “meaning units.” From them, five essential themes and 14 subthemes emerged. For meaning units to be synthesized into

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a theme, more than half of the participants had to provide relevant meaning units on the topic.

The research yielded five themes:

- a. The Importance of Foundational Experiences
- b. The Motivation to Learn “Arabic
- c. The Search for an Islāmic Identity
- d. The Reconciliation of Faith and Culture
- e. The Quest for Change

These themes represent the psychological integration of ‘Arabic as an L2 into participants' faith, identity, and emotional landscape, which in turn affects their learning process. Interview excerpts and detailed thematic analyses, presented in the Results section, illustrate this multifaceted phenomenon.

#### **4. RESULTS**

The results from this transformative, mixed-methods phenomenological study provide a nuanced understanding of the “Arabic language acquisition phenomenon experienced by Black and Latino Muslim converts in a U.S. context. This section addresses the research questions by presenting and synthesizing key findings from quantitative (QN) survey data, qualitative (QL) interviews, and historical contexts while offering insights into the participants’ lived experiences. The research questions are as follows:

- a. Which affective variables most significantly inform the ‘Arabic language acquisition processes of Black and Latino Muslim converts?

- b. Does cultural bias (on the part of the teacher or the learner) play a role in the 'Arabic language acquisition process of Black and Latino Muslim converts?
- c. What are the prevailing attitudes and experiences of Black and Latino Muslim converts while acquiring 'Arabic as a second language?
- d. How does the quantitative data elucidate the qualitative findings of this study?

#### 4.1 Quantitative Results

The QN survey data can be categorized into five broad categories: 1) Demographic Information, 2) Affective Variables That Inform Black and Latino 'Arabic Language Acquisition, 3) Perceptions of Cultural Biases in the 'Arabic as a Second Language Acquisition Process, 4) General Perceptions of, and Experiences with, 'Arabic Language Acquisition, and 5) Recommendations. Although the original study included twenty-eight survey items, this article will concentrate on the results of three representative questions (Q15, Q11, and Q19).

Regarding Research Question One (RQ1), over 99% of respondents completed Q15, which asked them to rank the perceived impact of eight affective variables on learning using a 5-point Likert scale. The results reveal that motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence – affective variables initially identified by Krashen (1982) – are significant factors for language acquisition among BALM converts. Among these, self-confidence was ranked highest by 35.74% of respondents, followed closely by anxiety (34.60%) and motivation (29.06%).

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Findings related to RQ2 reveal, however, that other factors related to the learning environment's culture significantly impact these learners. These factors include:

- Perceptions of marginalization in the learning environment (21.05%)
- Perceptions that the language program was not culturally responsive (20.23%)
- Distrust of the instructors or educational programs (18.56%)
- Perceptions that instructors did not believe in learners' potential because of race or ethnicity (14.12%)

Data also shows that respondents perceive that cultural biases in the learning process have impacted their learning. Slightly more than half (50.49%) of the 254 converts who responded to Q19 indicated that their experiences with cultural biases have had some level of impact. However, their perceptions of how significant that impact was varied.

The data related to RQ3 shows a disconnect between the respondents' perceptions of the importance of learning 'Arabic and their actual efforts to learn it. Although most (154/236) said that they have been Muslim for 12 - 51 years, with the mean number of years listed as twenty (20), they have not studied 'Arabic for a comparable number of years. Survey data indicate that 44.9% of the 236 respondents who responded to the question about studying 'Arabic (Q11) stated that they have

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studied 'Arabic for less than three years. Approximately 14% have studied it for less than a year (Abd'al-Rahim, 2024).

The findings related to RQ4 indicate that the QN and QL data are congruent, with the QL data providing further elucidation of the QN findings of this study. The QN data painted a clear picture of who this learner is, compiling demographic data on the learner and their quantifiable perceptions of their 'Arabic acquisition experiences.

#### 4.2 Qualitative Findings

The QL findings enriched the quantitative data, producing five key themes and offering more profound insight into the dynamics of identity, motivation, and cultural integration in 'Arabic language acquisition.

***Theme One: The Importance of Foundational Experiences.*** During the interview process, participants shared their backgrounds and experiences. All participants emphasized the significance of their first exposures to 'Arabic, particularly the impact of representation and their first teachers' cultural responsiveness on their feelings about the language. Representation in educational contexts refers to the extent to which educational settings accurately reflect the racial and cultural diversity of the communities they serve (New Leaders, 2021). It plays a crucial role in student success (Rosen, 2017; Scholes, 2018, 2020). Participants whose initial teachers were from their race or ethnicity often expressed feeling motivated by seeing Muslims from their race or ethnicity teaching 'Arabic (Abd'al-Rahim, 2024). Representation in classrooms and culturally responsive

initial exposures significantly influence learners' feelings toward 'Arabic.

**Theme Two: The Impetus to Learn 'Arabic.** This theme describes the learners' motivation to acquire the L2 and the role of intention in that motivation. Participants emphasized the importance of intentionality, which refers to the mind's focus on a specific goal (Searle, 1983). This concept is akin to the *niyyah* in Islām, which involves awareness of one's motives and is crucial for any action (Al-Ghazali, 2002). Participant 6 expressed the need for learners to be intentional in their studies, saying, "Muslim converts must know, without a doubt, that 'Arabic can be learned and mastered through dedication and hard work. That must be embedded into their intentions."

The participants did not cite common extrinsic motivators, such as employment or community acceptance, as their motivation for L2 acquisition (Dörnyei, 1994). Instead, most were motivated to learn 'Arabic to draw closer to Allāh through His divine words, demonstrating intrinsic motivations based on spiritual reasons. Participant 6 stated, "When we associate 'Arabic with the Qur'an-- that is our motivation." Intrinsic motivation, as noted by researchers Shirley Veas and Edwin Pancheo (2024), usually leads to more sustainable engagement and perseverance.

There are, however, impediments to that engagement and progress. Participants discussed 'Arabic diglossia and its connection to their intentions. While they did not use the term "diglossia," they emphasized the need for 'Arabic instruction in religious contexts to focus on the Qur'an's language or *Fuṣḥā*; they do not intend to become fluent in colloquial 'Arabic

(‘Amiyā). Instead, they aim to deepen their faith by having the intention to become proficient in *Fuṣḥā*. Participant 10 noted Muslims must have the intention to learn ‘Arabic to understand the Qur’ān, not just to learn another language. Participants view *Fuṣḥā* as a divinely protected form of ‘Arabic and ‘Amiyā as a form that varies according to socio-political influences.

Participants agreed that motivation is crucial but differed on its sources and the causes of demotivation. They noted that the Islāmic community’s culture and the cultural responsiveness of language programs impact learner motivation. Additionally, systemic racism was highlighted as affecting both instruction quality and learner motivation.

**Theme Three: The Quest for an Islāmic Identity.** Learning an additional language, particularly for religious purposes, is closely tied to identity and acculturation. Norton (2013) defines identity as a person’s understanding of their relationship to the world and their possibilities for the future. Acculturation (Berry, 2005) refers to the cultural and psychological changes that occur when someone from a non-dominant culture interacts with and then adjusts to, adopts, or reconciles aspects of a dominant culture. This process profoundly impacts identity. Participants highlighted how cultural influences and self-awareness shaped their identities, revealing that identity negotiation plays a crucial role in the language acquisition of BALM converts. According to Participant 2, “We don’t understand the connection between ‘Arabic and our identities. Many of our problems stem from our identity. Who are we as Muslims?”

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All participants discussed the significance of recognizing and affirming their identities during the language acquisition process. They addressed intersectionality and how this process is hindered by learners' uncertainties regarding their overlapping, conflicting, and ambiguous identities. According to Participant 1, "Only Black Muslims lack self-identity. We struggle with how we see ourselves and interact with others. Allāh tells us that He divided us into nations and tribes so that we may know one another. What can we learn if we all become the same?"

Participant 10, a Latino, expressed pressure to modify his cultural identity and dress according to 'Arab culture. He shared:

Brothers said I should wear a *thawb* [long, traditional shirt] on the *minbar* [pulpit]. Another said I was not setting a good role model for his son because he wanted his son, who attended public school, to wear a *thawb* to school. But our kids struggle with their identities. I advised him to focus on his son's heart and relationship with Allāh.

Participants acknowledged a profound sense of "otherness." As stated by Grajzl and others (2018), this phenomenon involves a sense of detachment from the dominant culture while maintaining allegiance to one's Indigenous culture, alongside consideration of the extent of assimilation. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) was a pioneer in applying the notion of otherness to the acculturation challenges faced by Black people in his esteemed work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois articulates the experiences of minorities who navigate dual identities, one linked to race or ethnicity and the other to national identity. He

describes this condition as a “double consciousness,” which captures the experience of existing in two distinct worlds and being judged by standards and values that do not align with one’s cultural background. He states:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3).

In a contemporary Islāmic context, this double consciousness is more accurately described as a “multiplicity of consciousness” (Abd’al-Rahim, 2024). BALM converts identify in numerous ways, with faith, race or ethnicity, and national identity, all being powerful and often conflicting identifiers. The participants frequently acknowledged this feeling. For example, Participant 2 said:

Africans were given an identity that was not theirs; we of African descent now understand ourselves through a European lens. No wonder we develop identity crises and inferiority complexes. We are assessing ourselves by standards that were superimposed on us.

Another aspect of otherness is the sense of not being entirely accepted into the Muslim community. Latino participants described instances where people assumed they were from overseas or acted surprised that Latino Muslims born in America could speak ‘Arabic, recite the Qur’ān correctly, or

dress in Islāmic garb every day. They discussed instances where they felt the need to navigate Islāmic culture while affirming their Latino ethnicity. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) described the emotions associated with this experience as a "mestizo consciousness," a complex identity that emerges from a Latino navigating multiple cultures. The term "mestizo" refers to individuals of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry. "Mestizo consciousness" is a type of "otherness" and a manifestation of the Latinos' "multiplicity of consciousness." Two participants shared their experiences with this emotion. According to Participant 10, "There were times when I felt like the only Latino in a world of 'Arab culture." Likewise, Participant 3 offered, "People always think I am from the Middle East. I am a proud Latina. I was the first Latina Muslim living in my area."

**Theme Four: The Reconciliation of Faith and Culture.** Participants report experiencing cognitive dissonance regarding 'Arabic. They recognize the importance of learning 'Arabic but also express that by adopting the semantics and pragmatics of 'Arabic, they may also be transforming both their culture and identity; this realization requires reconciliation.

Embracing Islām requires differentiating between 'Arab culture and Islām. Converts must consider which aspects of the language they need to integrate into their lives, and which are optional. Beyond memorizing the Qur'an and salutations, they must determine how much 'Arabic to incorporate into their daily vocabulary. Will the family residence be referred to as a "bayt"? Will "Daddy" be replaced by "Abu"? Even more critical and profound, will the new converts change their names to 'Arabic names, thereby erasing their non-Muslim familial ties

and heritage (Smith & Faris, 2014; Bin Yusuf & Dumbe, 2014)? Another aspect of this decision-making process is the convert's choice to extend their 'Arabic studies to include both the *Fuṣḥā*, considered by all participants to be a divinely produced and protected language, and 'Amiyā, which they perceive as susceptible to political, social, and historical influences and variations.

Participants raised concerns about how colloquial 'Arabic has been used to impose identity, erase culture, and create hierarchies. According to Participant 2:

For too long, people have promoted the idea that Islām is underpinned by 'Arab culture. We have ignored the fact that 'Arabic replaced native languages. We don't connect the role of religion and language, and how our native language is what gives us access to our culture.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a compelling framework for understanding the reconciliation of faith and culture, particularly in linguistic interactions (Fairclough, 1995). It examines how language perpetuates power dynamics linked to race, ethnicity, and identity (Fairclough, 2012) and asserts that language is not a neutral medium (Mesthrie, 2011), but a tool that can influence societal hierarchies, control politics, and govern culture. In the context of 'Arabic language acquisition, participants highlighted how colloquial 'Arabic has historically replaced native languages and erased cultural identities, creating hierarchies and fostering "linguistic discrimination" (Albarello & Rubini, 2015). For example, Participant 2 noted the imposition of 'Arabic on Indigenous languages and its role in identity erasure. Additionally, CDA compelled the researcher to

explore the political and cultural implications of language adoption, as well as how it shapes the balance between faith and cultural heritage. By analyzing these dynamics, CDA highlights the necessity for converts to critically navigate the integration of 'Arabic into their lives, balancing religious obligations with the preservation of their native cultural identities.

**Theme Five: The Yearning for Change.** Despite acknowledging numerous challenges on their 'Arabic proficiency journeys, the participants' resilience and optimism compelled them to share suggestions for change. These suggestions describe a need for a change in all facets of the learning process.

*A Change in Curricula.* Participant sentiments about curricula can be summarized using Participant 11's observation, "The scope and sequence of many 'Arabic programs are irrelevant."

The primary suggestions regarding curricula involve promoting 'Arabic vigorously, emphasizing the importance of *Şarf*, and incorporating reflective practices (*tadabbur*) into instruction. *Şarf*, a subcategory of 'Arabic language study, examines morphological patterns and processes, such as root-based word formation, inflection, derivation, and conjugation (*Ulum al-Azhar*, 2025). Two participants strongly advocated for a curricular emphasis on *Şarf*. Participant 11, a convert who has been an 'Arabic teacher for decades, shared the following:

*Şarf* is the most important thing for non-native 'Arabic speakers to learn, after that, the grammar and syntax. 'Arabs usually teach 'Arabic the way they have learned it, emphasizing grammar. School has become a place to fix grammar mistakes.

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But we can speak without really understanding the grammar. That is how we naturally learn to speak when we are young.

The participants expressed a desire for the curriculum to incorporate more opportunities for learners to reflect on the Qur'an and the learning process so that they can benefit from the Qur'an's transformative nature. Participant 8 suggests, "*Tadabbur* [reflection] is necessary. We must reflect on what we learn and ask Allāh to help us understand it.

*A Change in Instruction.* Participants emphasized the need for 'Arabic language programs to incorporate research-based practices that meet the diverse needs of learners, particularly those from non-mainstream cultures, adult learners, and those with special needs. Equal access to 'Arabic instruction for all Muslims is deemed a priority, with calls for differentiation and the adoption of teaching strategies rooted in an 'Arabic as a Second Language (ASL) approach. Concerns arose about inconsistent pacing in programs, which affects learner engagement and retention. Overall, participants noted a lack of competent oversight, including educators' failure to assess program effectiveness across various contexts. Participant 9 complained, "Classes always dwindle off. Shouldn't educators view it as a red flag that most students never complete all levels of a popular 'Arabic series?"

*A Change in Assessment.* Assessment, an essential aspect of language instruction, frequently causes anxiety in learners. Participants expressed concerns about teachers' low expectations for learner progress, excessive correction, and insufficient acknowledgment of student achievements. Many noted that educators often underestimated Black convert

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students, as highlighted by Participant 5: “They seem surprised when they meet Black people who know ‘Arabic. Some even believe that Black people lack the intellectual capacity to excel in ‘Arabic. Students can tell if their teachers believe in them.” Participant 2 summarized the participants’ sentiments about assessment, offering, “Our guiding value must be that preventing harm takes precedence over gaining benefit. Our approach to correcting problems must be balanced.”

## **5. DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Interpretation of Findings**

Existing research on this specific phenomenon is scarce, making this study a valuable contribution to fields such as linguistics, Islāmic Studies, educational psychology, culturally responsive education, and cultural anthropology. It is rooted in the work of foundational theorists in linguistics and culturally responsive education, emphasizing cultural variations in the role of emotions in the learning process. Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989), Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2012), Berry’s (2005) Acculturation Model, and Ting-Toomey’s Identity Negotiation Theory (2005) are essential to synthesizing and interpreting the findings.

There is a congruence between the QN categories and QL themes that emerge from the research. When considered together using the T-MMPR approach, the findings shed light on a complex cultural phenomenon that encompasses several key characteristics, including identity negotiation, motivation, and desire for intragroup belonging. Findings suggest that effective language acquisition for BALM converts requires educators and stakeholders to address systemic biases and

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create inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments that foster trust and a sense of belonging.

The QL interview findings complement the QN survey results. For example, motivation, a key variable identified in both data streams, is shaped by foundational experiences reported in the QN findings and by intentionality, as discussed in the QL interviews. The QN results identify the learning environments in which respondents were taught. At the same time, the QL interviews revealed how participants' initial encounters with 'Arabic (and the cultural representations in those learning environments) influenced their feelings about the language.

Another significant finding from the QN results is that although the research affirmed the significance of Krashen's three affective variables (motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety), it also clearly highlights the equally significant role of variables related to perceptions of cultural responsiveness. Unlike the Krashen factors, these culturally-rooted variables emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships, teacher-learner rapport, and classroom dynamics in shaping learner success. They shift the weighty responsibility for academic progress from one borne solely by learners to one whose responsibility is shared by everyone in the learning environment.

The synthesis of literature and original research shows how historical, psychological, social, and political factors in post-1965 America shaped the identity negotiation of BALM converts learning 'Arabic. During this era, Black and Latino people openly affirmed their heritage identities while negotiating the legacies of the Trans-Saharan, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean 'Arab Slave Trades—all precursors to the

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notorious Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Becoming aware of this history and experiencing strained 'Arab-Black relationships produced cognitive dissonance within many BALM converts, complicating their acquisition of 'Arabic. Consequently, learning 'Arabic can foster a "multiplicity of consciousness" (Abd'al-Rahim, 2024) as BALM converts negotiate between identifying as a student of a language possessing aspirational religious significance and one representing genuine historical oppression. For these learners, 'Arabic's spiritual importance is psychologically juxtaposed against its association with slave traders and cultural imperialists, creating a unique challenge in integrating their identities and actualizing their sense of belonging within the global Muslim community.

This dynamic view of identity extends Du Bois's (1903) concept of "double consciousness" to accommodate the complexities of identity in the modern period. The relevance of his idea for Black people at the start of the twentieth century is analogous to the situation of BALM converts during the fifty years after 1965. Both were periods when non-White citizens of the United States collectively rediscovered and affirmed their racial identities, questioning why those identities denied them access to the full benefits of citizenship in the U.S. However, during the latter period, BALM converts had to reconcile not only their racial and ethnic identities, but also those connected to their chosen faith. This inner negotiation becomes even more complex as BALMs have become increasingly aware of the impact of intersectionality on their identities. When this phenomenon is applied to Black and Latino Muslims learning 'Arabic, identity negotiation theory can explain how their intercultural communication and belonging are influenced by

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ongoing, and sometimes conflicting, presentations of identity. In these contemporary cases, what historically was called a dual consciousness evolves into a “multiplicity of consciousness” (Abd’al-Rahim, 2024), an ongoing cognitive and emotional juggling act in which multiple identities compete or cooperate to inform self-perception, behavior, and even language acquisition.

The acquisition of a new language, particularly one tied to faith and global sociopolitical tensions, such as ‘Arabic, can become both a tool for spiritual alignment and a site of internal dissonance. ‘Arabic language acquisition, therefore, is both a spiritual practice and a source of tension. As learners attempt to navigate their overlapping identities, the language classroom becomes essential for affirming their identities and mitigating identity stress, thereby fostering both self-awareness and a broader understanding.

## **5.2 Limitations**

The limitations of this research include the reliance on sources written in English due to the researcher’s limited ‘Arabic fluency and the challenges associated with using the less common T-MMPR approach. Objectivity may be slightly compromised, as the findings rely heavily on qualitative interpretation, which inherently carries some bias despite the use of phenomenological bracketing and the triangulation of quantitative data. Additionally, the scope is restricted to BALM converts in the West, limiting generalizability.

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### 5.3 Recommendations

The original study on which this article is based employs a transformative mixed-methods research approach (T-MMPR), focusing on social change to address inequity and marginalization. Therefore, this article offers clear recommendations for BALM converts to achieve proficiency in 'Arabic. The recommendations that follow will require personal effort, community support, and systemic change:

- Curriculum and Instruction: Update 'Arabic curricula and strategies to be culturally sensitive and enhance effective learning. Focus on *Ṣarf* ('Arabic morphology), reflective practices, differentiation, and appropriate pacing.
- Assessment: Maintain elevated expectations without excessive correction, recognizing student successes to boost confidence.
- Representation: Increase visibility of Black and Latino 'Arabic speakers and teachers as relatable role models.
- Communication: Foster open discussions about historical Muslim group interactions and contemporary relations, raising awareness and promoting healing through educational initiatives.
- Solidarity: Organize events to build relationships and understanding among diverse racial and ethnic groups in the Muslim community.

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- Resource Development: Create culturally relevant content and materials for a diverse learner population, including BALM converts.
  - Mentorship: Establish mentorship and peer support programs to provide guidance and foster community connection.

These findings underscore the importance of creating supportive learning environments that address the learning challenges outlined in this article. While Krashen's (1982) emphasis on learner motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety is pertinent, it is also crucial to consider the learners' cultures, teachers' roles, the curricula, and the learning community's cultural responsiveness.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The pursuit of 'Arabic language proficiency among Black and Latino Muslim converts in post-1965 America is influenced by historical legacies, cultural identities, and systemic challenges. Factors such as the 'Arab Slave Trades (AST), Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (TAST), intergroup dynamics, and cultural biases in education can impede language learning. Despite these obstacles, faith, resilience, and optimism motivate learners to engage with 'Arabic. These findings underscore the need for transformative approaches to enhance linguistic skills within Black and Latino Muslim communities. They support systemic changes that address learners' emotional and cultural needs, ensuring diverse representation and culturally responsive educational opportunities. It also encourages further research on the intersection of race, language, and religion to develop equitable and empowering learning environments.

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