



Exploring tutoring and learning gains for learners of Arabic

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Abstract

The present study examined the link between tutoring sessions and students' learning of Arabic. The language tutor in this study spent one semester with a beginner level class of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Tutoring logs following each session were used to explore the extent to which these sessions could be linked to learners' performance in the class. Findings showed a positive and significant, albeit moderate, correlation between the number of tutoring sessions each student attended and their final grade. The analysis of the logs (n = 174) also showed that vocabulary usage, pronunciation, reading, and grammar were the most frequently requested topics during the tutoring sessions. Additionally, the logs showed that students sought tutoring around exam times. These findings offer various ways to reflect on how students utilize language learning resources, including interactions with a native-speaking tutor.

Keywords: tutoring, Arabic language, tutoring in Arabic, foreign language learning, learning gains

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Tutoring and Foreign Language Learning

In addition to other forms of learning, tutoring students one-on-one has been shown to be an effective form of instruction (Cohen et al., 1982; Bloom, 1984; Chi et al., 2001; Chapman, 2010; East et al., 2012; Katz & Albacete, 2013; Lepper et al., 1990; VanLehn, 2011). When available, not only can tutoring help learners improve their performance but it can also provide them with additional language support. This is especially critical for smaller language departments or language sections and certainly true in the case of Arabic, since resources for learning Arabic remain limited in both quality and quantity despite the recent increased interest in studying the language (Khazaal, 2010; Ryding, 2013). Notwithstanding those limitations in resources, there have been more resources available for the study of Arabic that cater to learners of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as well as the dialects. Interest in the study of Arabic has been on the rise, with demand for the language increasing dramatically (Abdullah & Al-Battal, 2010; Allen 2007; Taha 2007) between 1998, when around 5,505 students were enrolled in Arabic programs in U.S. colleges, and 2010, when 35,083 students enrolled. This demand was triggered additionally by the National Security Language Initiative to promote the study of foreign languages, especially languages deemed critical for U.S. national security interests by former President George W. Bush (Strout, 2006a).

According to Anderson (2010), the interest in learning Arabic by Westerners has dramatically increased in the last decade:

Academic interest in the Arab world has steadily increased [since 9/11], and along with it, study abroad. During the 1999-2000 academic year, 695 American students studied in the Middle East, according to the Institute of International Education. That number rose to 3,416 by 2007-8. (p. 1)

This demand has driven the need for materials and curriculum development in Arabic, which remains limited compared to other foreign languages in the United States. The growth necessitated creating new language resources, which were largely unavailable, for Arabic language learners who come from a myriad of social and educational backgrounds. In surveying 209 Arabic teachers in the United States, Abdullah and Al-Batal (2010) found that most of them acknowledge the lack of level-appropriate resources for students to use, particularly outside of the classroom where little coaching is available to students as they navigate online materials on their own and dissect what can and cannot be used. It is worth noting that new courses and textbooks have since been created to respond to the demand (Ryding, 2013), and although the resources available may no longer be limited in scope and mode of presentation, Arabic lags behind other commonly taught languages, especially in the availability of resources on the web.

The diglossic situation of Arabic has often presented yet another piece that complicates the Arabic learning narrative. Khazaal (2010) described the limited usability of available online materials, including *YouTube* videos, music clips, and websites. She argued that because these resources feature different Arabic vernaculars, their usefulness in the classroom is limited. In addition, the survey by Abdullah and Al-Batal (2010) indicated that materials development was ranked the most pressing need facing the Arabic language teaching profession. Institutions that offer foreign language study vary in the amount of support they provide to their students outside of the classroom. Language tutoring is one way to make up for the limited resources for Arabic learners, who cannot easily find speakers of the language outside of the classroom, and to supplement their learning. Therefore, the availability of tutoring in this context could provide an important boost to Arabic learners. Despite the importance of tutoring in the field of foreign language education, there is a dearth of studies examining tutoring in Arabic and its implications for learners and the field at large. This study aims to fill in the gap in this understudied aspect of Arabic language pedagogy.

Language Difficulties in Arabic and Filling the Gaps

For many of learners of Arabic, the challenges of learning the language begin before they enter the classroom. The literature has documented both the actual (Antes, 1999; Russak & Fragman, 2014; Stevens, 2006) and the potential and perceived (Ryding, 2013; Strout, 2006b) difficulties Arabic students are likely to face, not because of what is known in the field of second language acquisition but because of anecdotal testaments around learning Arabic. As is well-documented, all language learners face a variety of challenges in learning their target language across a spectrum of domains, including vocabulary development and grammar, among others. Stevens (2006), for instance, discussed the popular belief that Spanish is easier than Arabic, showing how it is generally assumed that learning Arabic is more difficult than learning other languages. Stevens also noted that the United States Foreign Service Institute ranks Arabic among languages that are most difficult to learn. Nonetheless, there are areas of language difficulties reported in the literature that are particular to learners of Arabic. Ryding (2013) outlined areas of difficulty that Arabic learners face in several domains such as the acquisition of sounds foreign to native speakers of English. One example is the voiced pharyngeal fricative, [ʕ] ع (Elkhafaifi, 2001). Other studies have examined difficulties Arabic learners face with grapheme-phoneme representation in their spelling development (e.g., Russak & Fragman, 2014), and, even more predictably, issues with writing in Arabic more broadly (e.g., Hedayet, 1990). In addition to these linguistic issues, Arabic learners and programs face other challenges. Ryding (1994) found that not only could students not think of any Arabic speakers that were role models, but also that Arabic programs are constantly in survival mode because it is common for students to discontinue their studies after the first year (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2010), an issue that other language programs face to varying degrees as well.

Tutoring and Learning Gains

Research on the effects of tutoring on students' academic performance has shown favorable outcomes (e.g., Chapman, 2010; Derry & Potts, 1998; Harvey Matthews, 2010; Lepper & Chabay, 1988; Lepper et al., 1993). One of the reasons tutoring has been shown to be successful pertains to the interactive nature of a

tutoring session (Katz & Albacete, 2013). In a tutoring session, tutors vary their instructional style based on several factors, including the tutee's ability, and as such, tutoring becomes a highly interactive process. As Lepper et al. (1990) and Lepper and Chabay (1988) have shown, tutors only intervene when necessary, and much of the success tutees achieve can be self-credited, as they show their independence by completing tasks on their own. In addition, a great deal of what happens during the tutoring session is based on several components that come together, including the subject matter, the type of tutoring requested, and the expertise of the tutor. There are also individual factors within the tutees themselves, such as their motivation and agenda for the tutoring session, among many other variables (Derry & Potts, 1998). Thus, tutoring sessions are highly organized learning sessions, and because of the active roles the tutor and tutee play, as well as students' motivation, tutoring has been shown to affect learning. In investigating the characteristics of students who seek tutoring in foreign languages, Harvey Matthews (2010) found that students who sought tutoring tended to have high performance and mastery goal orientations, albeit lower GPA scores compared to those who did not seek tutoring.

Research has also examined profiles of skilled and expert tutors, and the techniques they use to address students' learning, each of which contributes significantly to the success of the tutoring session. Derry and Potts (1998) examined five experienced tutors' personal constructs of tutoring and identified that in a tutoring session, tutors gather evidence about students, identify student's profiles in terms of characterizing their ability and motivation, and are adaptive to the tutee, adjusting their instruction to fit students' abilities using these characterizations (p. 94). Research has also shown that tutoring sessions constitute identifiable styles regardless of the subject taught, the population, the content domains, or the setting (Lepper et al, 1993). Derry and Potts (1998) showed that different styles of tutoring, both direct and indirect, existed among tutors whose goal was to help students become independent learners in the long run. An example of a direct style is providing the answer directly upon noticing that the learner is becoming frustrated or unable to complete the task, whereas indirect styles include varying the instruction style to develop a learner's independence. In addition, not only do tutors assist with foreign language teaching or tutoring but they also often participate in several departmental, cultural, and local events and activities, and they usually make an impact outside the classroom as well as in the classroom. Among other things, they may also run foreign language clubs and help at college recruiting affairs (Chapman, 2010).

Teacher-Learner Interaction

Studies on teacher-learner¹ interactions have shown positive learning gains across a variety of language settings and contexts (e.g., Rodríguez-Sabater, 2005; Thornson, 1998). In a study examining Peer Teaching Assistants (PTAs) who were advanced undergraduates tutoring students in lower-level courses, Rodríguez-Sabater (2005) found that around 94% of students reported improvements in speaking, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. There are several characteristics of teacher-learner interaction that uniquely make them conducive to improving language ability and increasing learning gains. These interactions offer opportunities for negotiation of meaning, since they are a type of social interaction in that they offer opportunities for recasts and repairs and require a level of initiation on the part of students. Another feature of these experiences is the learner-centered focus, which often involves tutoring, or any subset of language assistance, that is meant to boost learner ability through scaffolded interaction, which in turn promotes learner autonomy. However, these experiences, for practical and logistical reasons, do not necessarily happen in a classroom setting. The tutoring experience provides the learners more space and time, and usually takes place within a setting of equals, which creates a laid-back experience that helps learners manage their anxiety and progress in ways that would not be possible in the classroom.

Additionally, this type of teacher-learner interaction provides an opportunity for learners to practice skills in a way that might not be possible in the classroom, and correction of pronunciation or grammar that otherwise may make students feel more anxious and less willing to practice.

Tutoring experiences are even more important in contexts in which a target language is taught in an area where it is not commonly spoken. According to Thornson (1998), "in teaching and learning foreign

languages in places where the target language is not spoken, how to increase the amount and variety of target language interaction among learners is one of the biggest challenges that language professionals face” (p. 570). In a study of a group of third year Japanese students labeled as junior teachers who were tutoring first year Japanese students, researchers found that students overwhelmingly appreciated and benefited from interacting with third year students. According to Thornson, “the participation of the junior teachers appears to have considerably increased Japanese language input and interactive opportunities of the students” (p. 573). Additionally, 72% of students indicated that they learned grammar and vocabulary as well as study skills from the junior teachers. Some also reported learning “that persistence will pay off” (p. 574). These findings indicate the role that tutors play in expanding learning opportunities for students in foreign language programs.

Rationale

According to Lo (2019), “despite the expansive American interest in Arabic and its relevance to many other communities in the world, minimal research has been conducted to evaluate successes and challenges of teaching Arabic in the United States” (p. 2). The present study addresses the tension present in Arabic language programs, especially those in smaller departments with limited resources. The demand for higher proficiency in speaking Arabic and the financial constraints of institutions—especially those with declining enrollments and funding—to deliver the usually costly high-impact experiences (e.g., study abroad), “force Arabic teachers and curriculum designers to be ever more creative and efficient in the design of the programs” (DiMeo, 2018, p. 111). This creativity could include utilizing tutoring as a resource; however, despite the apparent pedagogical fit between the demand for higher proficiency in speaking Arabic, on the one hand, and the financial constraints of institutions, on the other, there is a dearth of studies on tutoring of Arabic students. As an effective and relatively low-cost resource, tutoring can be one of the available tools to enhance the learning experience for Arabic students, especially those in small language programs with limited resources. Additionally, tutors provide another layer of the learning experience, mainly the opportunity for students to interact with native speakers of the target culture, who can also provide information about culture, society, and the Arabic community at large. This study aimed to explore tutoring and language development for learners of Arabic, based on the following research questions:

1. Is there a link between the number of tutoring sessions students attended and their final grades in the course?
2. What type of help do students request during the tutoring session?
3. What kind of information do tutoring sessions provide, in terms of student behavior, that can help improve the language learning experience?

Instructional Context

The Arabic program at West Chester University of Pennsylvania is typical for colleges where Arabic is not taught as a major. It offers students only a minor in Arabic upon completion of 18 credits. The university requires language study for some academic programs with two options: (1) Completion of the two elementary-level courses (ARB101: Elementary Modern Standard Arabic I, and ARB102: Elementary Modern Standard Arabic II) and the two intermediate-level courses (ARB201: Intermediate Modern Standard Arabic I, and ARB202: Intermediate Modern Standard Arabic II) in that order; and (2) Completion of ARB101, ARB102, and nine credits through courses about the Arab world and culture offered in English. The program’s goals are to help students build their skills in all language domains, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The minor has a modest goal of helping students achieve between Novice-High and Intermediate-Low on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) test. In addition, the small enrollment in the program dictates that ARB101 is offered in the fall and ARB102 in the spring. Courses run for a total of 15 weeks of instruction with three meetings a week, each 50 minutes in length. The two faculty in the program use a variety of texts and teaching aids and do not usually use the same textbook, even though they are required to meet the same student learning outcomes for the course and the program as a whole. The language focus is Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Courses generally require students to

complete a final exam and a number of quizzes spaced throughout the semester to ensure students keep up with the material. There are no particular chapter exams, but there are regular quizzes every other week or so that assess knowledge of vocabulary and basic structures. The course also includes other in-class and out-of-class activities and a range of assignments in addition to the graded assessments noted above. For example, students record themselves reading short sentences or phrases and create recordings in which they speak briefly about themselves. These activities are meant to help students practice as much Arabic as possible across all domains, inside and outside of the class.

Tutor Background

The tutor in the study did not receive training on how to help learners. However, the tutor did have prior teaching experience. As a native speaker of Arabic (specifically Egyptian Arabic) and considering the fact that the course is for beginners, the range of tutoring was expected to be limited to issues that pertain to a beginner-level course, such as explaining vocabulary, basic grammar, help with pronunciation, and other related tasks.

Method

Data for this study is comprised of three sources: The students' final grades in the course, the tutoring logs that were filled out by tutors and tutees following each tutoring session, and the weekly journals the students kept of their experience learning Arabic. Each tutoring log had two sections: one completed by the tutor and the other completed by the student. The student section included information about the type of help they had requested. The tutor section included information about the session type and other basic information like day of the week, time in, time out, and the topic the tutor worked with the tutee on. The tutor was required to fill out session log information for each student who received tutoring.

Participants

There were 25 students (15 females and 10 males) studying Arabic at the university, and they were enrolled in a variety of programs. The 25 students in the study were all taught by the same instructor. The participants had no knowledge of Arabic prior to the class and there were no heritage Arabic learners among the participants. Typically, students who are enrolled in Arabic courses take the language as part of the language requirement at the university (as discussed in the instructional context section).

Data Collection

Students were strongly encouraged to meet at least once a week with the tutor, although they were encouraged to meet more often to further improve their Arabic. The tutor and tutee were not required to spend any specific amount of time during these tutoring sessions, nor were they required to study or focus on a specific aspect of language. The sessions were meant to help students utilize the tutor, whose role was to provide support and help them learn Arabic. The students were expected to meet once a week with the tutor for a minimum of ten weeks in the semester (meaning a minimum of 250 tutoring sessions should have been logged). However, not all students attended the tutoring sessions and, in some cases, students did not submit the tutoring logs. The total number of tutoring sessions analyzed in this study amounted to 174 logs, which is approximately a 70% completion rate. There were also dates when the tutor was unavailable to attend. The class met on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The tutor was available on those days and on Tuesdays and Thursdays by appointment for the students who could not meet during scheduled tutoring hours.

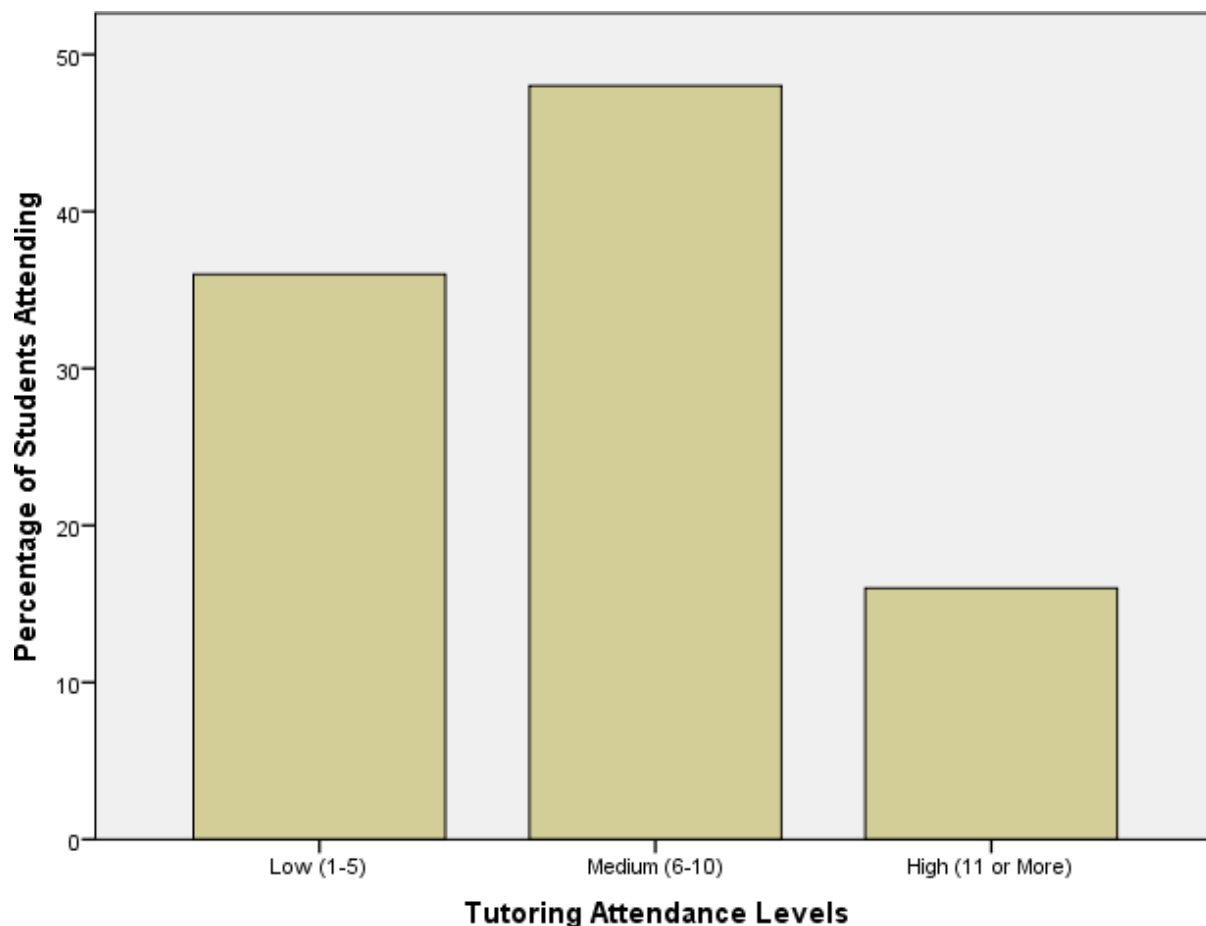
Results

Tutoring and Final Grades

Figure 1 shows the number of tutoring sessions students attended over the course of the semester. There was a positive and significant, albeit moderate, correlation between the number of tutoring sessions and the students' final grade in the course ($r(23) = .54, p < .05$). The Pearson correlation suggests that tutoring was linked to students' final grades and thus helped support language development of the students in the study. In other words, the more tutoring sessions students attended, the higher their final grade in the course was. Students' tutoring attendance was grouped into three main groups: those who attended 1-5 sessions; those who attended 6-10 sessions; and those who attended 11 or more sessions. The rationale for grouping them in such a way is meant to highlight the differences in attendance by students. Tutoring attendance behavior can be looked at in terms of low attendance, medium attendance, and high attendance, so to speak. This reflects the expectation that students would attend sessions at least once a week. Roughly speaking, those who went about once a week were grouped in the more than 11 group; those who went every other week were in the 6-10 group, and those who went once every three weeks were in the 1-5 group. As can be seen in Figure 1, 48% of students attended between 6-10 tutoring sessions, with about 16% attending 11 or more sessions, and about 36% attending five sessions or fewer.

Figure 1

Students' Attendance of Tutoring Sessions at Three Levels During 15-Week Semester



Although many other variables likely influence students' grades, it is plausible that the additional support students received outside of class via tutoring was linked to their final grades in the course.

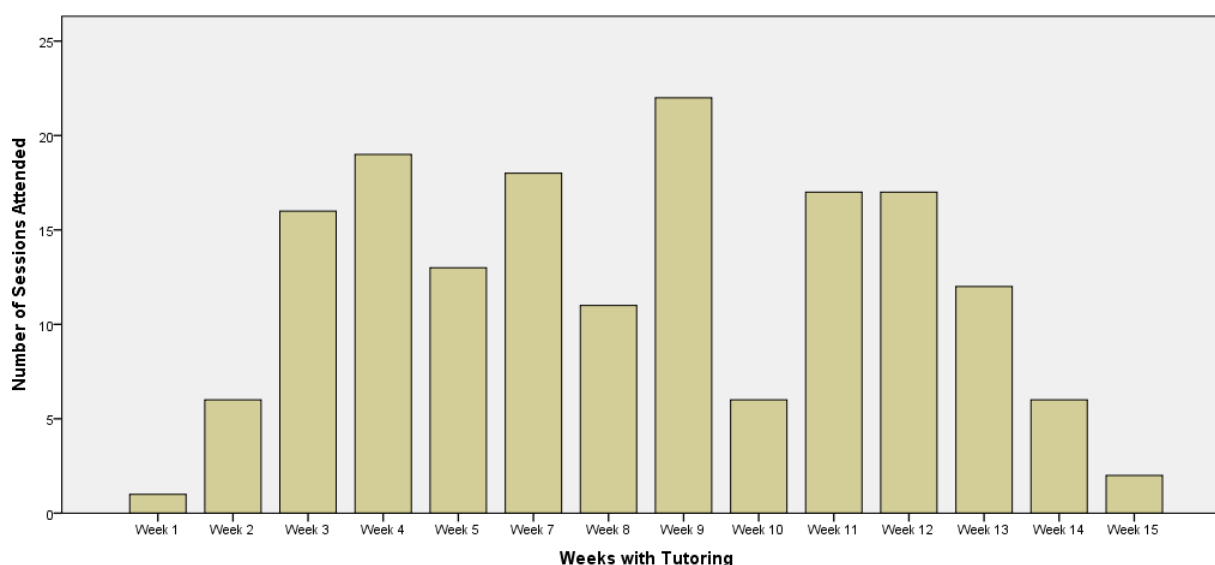
Equally important is that Arabic students do not generally have access to additional support outside of class. Online resources, which are increasingly being added, are still limited, and many of the resources that are

available are not generally useful (Khazaal, 2010). Hence, every support resource, especially something as interactive as tutoring, is likely to be helpful and useful for Arabic learners.

In addition to the link between tutoring and learning gains, there was other descriptive information that emerged from examining the logs, which show how and when students utilized tutoring as a resource. Data from the tutoring logs showed that the tutor worked with the students every week except during university-scheduled breaks. As shown in Figure 2, tutoring peaked during Week 4 and Week 9 and decreased continuously toward the end of the semester. There were seven tutoring logs that did not include dates about the tutoring sessions. The first two weeks and the last three weeks witnessed the least amount of tutoring. One possible explanation could be the logistics of setting up the tutor's schedule and informing students of where and when to meet the tutor. Similarly, students tend to be more occupied at the end of the semester, preparing for their other course exams or requirements and finishing up their end-of-semester projects for their other classes.

Figure 2

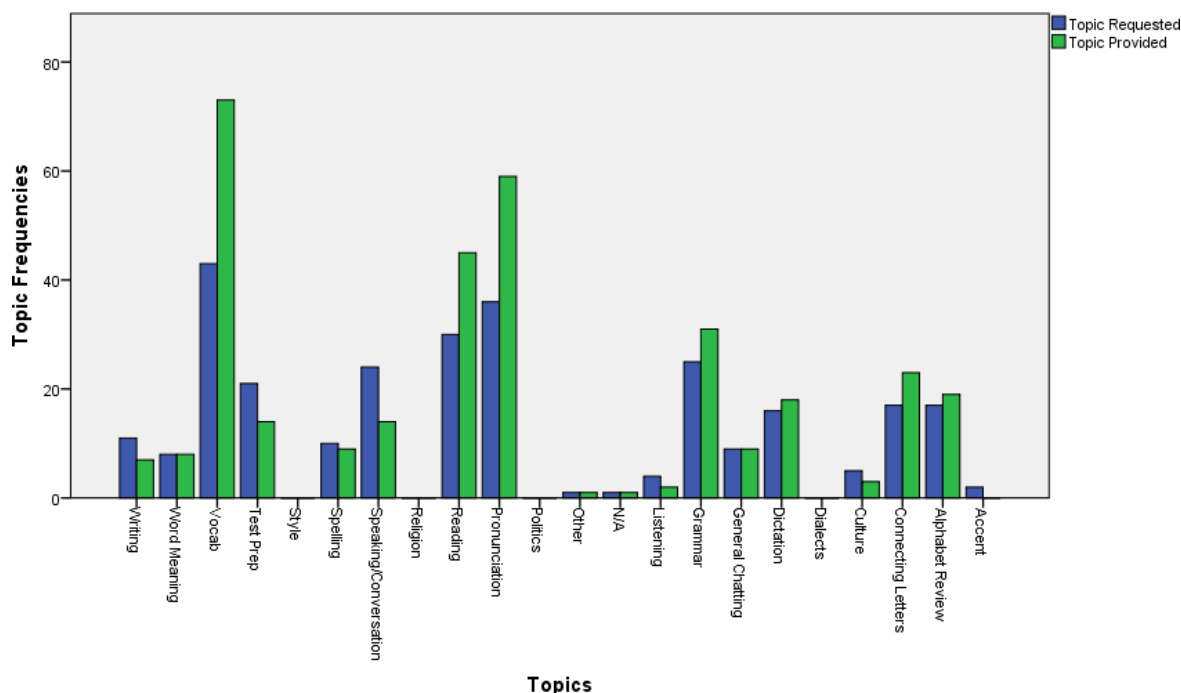
Number of Tutoring Sessions During 15-Week Semester



Data from the tutoring logs also revealed the range of topics students discussed with the tutor. As can be seen from Figure 3, the most requested area for tutoring was vocabulary usage, followed by pronunciation, reading, and grammar. It must be noted that the help requested was general in its scope, and both the tutor and the tutees did not elaborate when describing the nature of the session. It is also important to note that students could have talked about other things during or after the tutoring session, as a few of them indicated in their journals, but did not report these discussions or conversations in the logs.

Figure 3

Range and Frequency of Topics Discussed in Tutoring Sessions



As previous research has shown, tutors can, and usually will, adjust their tutoring based on their interaction and the level of independence the learner has. Derry and Potts (1998) showed that tutors would vary their style of tutoring to help students become independent learners in the long run. Thus, it is possible this variation in tutoring and the discussions that the tutor and tutee had might have gone unreported or deemed unimportant to include in the logs. Indeed, students' journal entries referred to these difficulties and, at times, tutees included notes in their journals about meeting with the tutor for additional help.

Tutoring Sessions by Help Requested and Help Provided

Vocabulary usage and pronunciation were some of the most requested areas during the tutoring sessions, as can be seen in Figure 3. It is not uncommon for Arabic students to have pronunciation difficulties at the beginner level, due to the large inventory of consonants Arabic has relative to English (e.g., the pharyngeal fricative). Additionally, vocabulary is the so-called building block of language learning, and considering that with each week students must learn more vocabulary, it becomes more difficult to retain those words and might therefore account for the focus on vocabulary in the tutoring logs. Furthermore, the quizzes and various assessments required students to be able to recall and use the new words they were being taught, which might explain the prevalence of the topic in the logs. It is typical for a first course in language to focus on vocabulary since students often come to the class with no background knowledge of Arabic whatsoever.

Tutoring Logs and Journal Entries

For each journal entry, the students were asked to briefly discuss strategies they came up with to help them learn Arabic, as well as the difficulties they encountered while learning Arabic. Results based on the tutoring logs matched the information students provided in their journal entries. Students' journals referenced issues they faced with pronunciation. Excerpts indicate that students' difficulties with sound recognition and pronunciation mostly stemmed from sounds unfamiliar to them because they do not exist in English. As one student noted:

I'm having more problems with the letters and pronunciations than I thought I would have. I have been looking online and finding websites with pronunciation and letter forming help, so that when the time comes for our quiz, I will know what I am doing. (S11)²

Issues with pronunciation of letters were common as one student noted:

This week I have been struggling with the pronunciation of letters. I know what sounds they make, but I am having trouble recalling them as quickly as other students or as quickly as you seem to want us to. (S10)

The difficulty with sounds meant some students could not recognize a given word simply because they could not recognize the sound, as this excerpt shows:

I often mistake certain sounds for others. Say there's a word that begins with a 'k' sound, it will sometimes take me 5+ hearings of the word to realize that it begins with a 'k' and not any other sounds. I thought the word for 'shirt' started with a 'p' for the majority of a class³. Again, this problem is easily remedied by practice and knowing the alphabet so I can read the word and piece together its pronunciation myself after hearing it. (S8)

As the following excerpt shows, another student had difficulty remembering the key vocabulary for the food chapter:

I'm struggling with remembering all of the food terms. I remember the basic Key Terms (the ones we had to record) because I studied them repeatedly over the weekend, since I knew we were going to have the Dictation quiz, but I'm struggling with remembering the other food words. (S7)

Another student echoed a similar concern at the end of the semester:

This week in Arabic I learned about food and some new vocab, about what time the game is. The new vocab is fairly easy, and I learned it quickly with some practice this weekend. There was a lot of food to remember, but I love food. I definitely don't remember all of it, but it was very interesting. (S12)

As can be seen, the data in the logs is echoed by information students noted in their journal entries about the need for additional language practice around pronunciation and vocabulary usage.

Tutoring by Day of the Week

Findings showed that tutoring sessions were mostly done on Fridays and the end of the week, with some visits on Wednesdays, and very few on Tuesdays and Thursdays, as can be seen in [Figure 4](#). Even though the tutor was available every day of the week, logs showed that students sought tutoring on the days they had Arabic class and during scheduled hours for the tutor. In addition, as seen in [Figure 5](#), the logs showed that most of the tutoring sessions during the 15-week semester lasted between five and 30 minutes. About 15% of the tutoring sessions lasted 31 to 60 minutes and none were reported to have lasted more than an hour.

Figure 4

Frequency of Tutoring Session Attendance During 15-Week Semester by Day of the Week (in Descending Order)

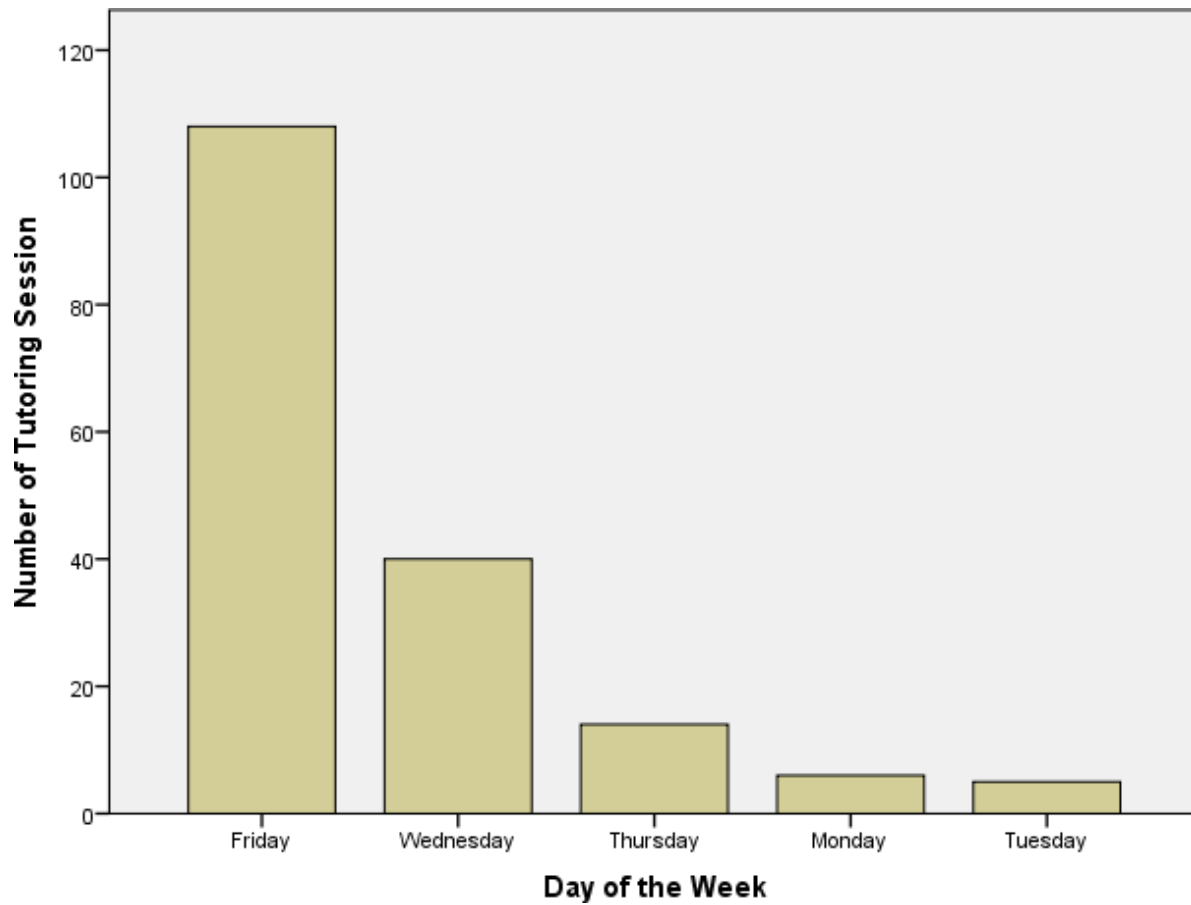
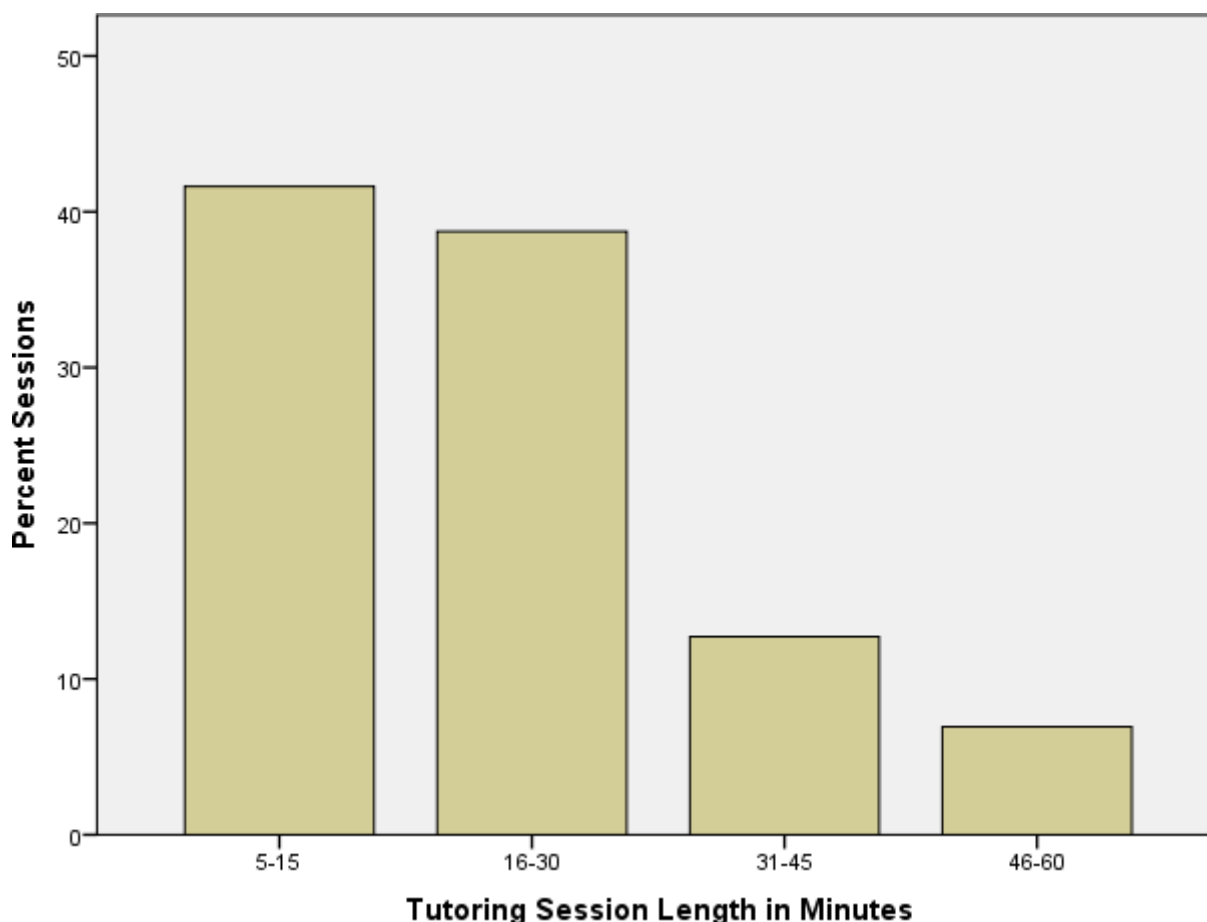


Figure 5

Distribution of Tutoring Sessions Across Four Session-Length Ranges



One possible explanation for why Friday had the most attended sessions could be that that it allowed students to go over all the material from that week at once. It could also be the case that students who attended tutoring on Friday did so to avoid having to do work over the weekend when they would not have access to the tutor. Attending the Friday tutoring sessions gave students additional interactions with the tutor and allowed them to exchange ideas and practice the language. Attending the Friday session functioned as a recap session that reinforced the learning and instruction that took place in class and provided students with additional language support. The session seemed to also function as a way for students to share their weekly experience with the tutor. While not directly expressed in the journals, it can be inferred that a few students found it helpful to be able to talk to the tutor about the workload of the class, the amount of time it took to complete the assignments, and the difficulties students sometimes faced while speaking and listening in the classroom.

Tutoring and Cultural Exchange

Findings show that Arab culture exchange did not feature prominently in the logs. That is, when students attended tutoring, they did not seek assistance with understanding Arabic culture, nor did they ask questions about Arabic culture. This may be surprising considering the cultural roles tutors play and the expectations they have as cultural informants and catalysts for promoting intercultural competence. A possible reason for why students did not seek assistance with understanding Arab culture might have to

do with the fact that learners sought tutoring mostly to help them learn Arabic and do well on exams. Since Arab culture was not part of the exams, although examined and discussed as part of the class, students did not seem to believe it was as essential as understanding the vocabulary and grammar. That is not to say that students did not want to learn about Arab culture. Even though culture was not featured in the logs, it was reported in the journals students kept. One of the students noted in a journal entry their desire to be able to converse in Arabic daily, suggesting an immersive language setting, and noted the importance of being a part of the culture:

Ideally what I would like is someone to converse daily in Arabic, which would make it a lot easier, the lab and tutor are great additions, but I want to emerge [sic] myself in the culture, like I used to do in the Marine Corps, that is the best way to learn. (S3)

It is also important to point out that students might have had discussions with the tutor about Arab culture that were not reflected in the logs, perhaps because either the student or the tutor felt the tutoring session did not need to focus on culture when the students came for help on language questions. There is evidence that students did in fact want to learn about Arab culture, and they noted so in their journals. According to their journals, students seemed to appreciate how much cultural information they became familiar with as they attended tutoring. One student (S1) seemed excited to learn about “the typical fast foods unique to Egypt called Kushari; IT LOOKS AMAZING.” Another student commented on the cultural tidbits the tutor showed, particularly as they pertain to relationships and rites of passage in the Arab world:

We went over what happens 7 days after the birth of a child and why Arabic men hold hands in public (WOH coolness, very interesting). We watched *YouTube* videos of other students our age going over how to order things at a restaurant. Watching these students made me feel a lot better about my Arabic speaking, because they looked just as unsure about their speech, accents, and what exactly they were saying as I did at the beginning and even now. (S1)

Excerpts also showed students were very enthusiastic about learning about some of the cultural practices in the Arab world through the tutor:

The meeting with the tutor was a lot of fun. It’s amazing how much *YouTube* videos can teach someone even about a culture. In Arab cultures guys can hold hands and won’t be thought of as gay but of close friends or family. It’s also really cool to learn about slang words and words like حبيبي (habeebi) can even be used with friends not just the person you love. It really shows that Arabic is a warm language and a warm culture. (S13)

This appreciation of cultural tidbits is echoed by several students. This student noted how impressed they were with certain cultural practices when presented during class lectures and with the tutor:

Like, today we talked about how Arabs make more of an effort to connect with each other and make small talk. I don’t usually have the patience or the tact for that, so I was pretty impressed. I didn’t realize Arabic was that warm of a language either. I don’t really use pet names unless I’m dealing with little kids and I’m not sure what their real names are. So, I definitely like the little culture lessons you sprinkle throughout the class. (S9)

Language Tutors and Language Support

Tutors are expected to provide support in language skills, and tutoring is meant to help students develop their ability and confidence as potential speakers of the language (Rodríguez-Sabater, 2005; Thornson, 1998). Students indicated in their journals that they benefited from the tutoring available in several areas of their language development:

I’m feeling more and more comfortable with the new syllables. Spelling isn’t an issue, but when we did the spellings just from listening, I fell into a few of the traps. After all was explained the differences

between short and long vowels was really clear. I don't think that I will have any problems with it in the future. I still will practice with the tutor. (S14)

Because pronunciation was an area of difficulty in general for students, many of their entries regarding work with the tutor showed positive attitudes about learning and about the tutor focusing on their area of concern, as noted by one of the students who was very appreciative of the tutor's effort to help them learn:

I also like the tutoring sessions with the tutor. Another way that helps me learn the best is continually writing words as she says them. She has really helped me with the connecting of the letters and the possessive. Going to the once-a-week tutor session helps me a lot with what is going on in class. (S5)

Not only did students report tutoring sessions to be helpful for learning Arabic but they also expressed comfort that, in case of difficulty, the tutor would be able to help, thus providing much needed support. As one student noted:

I have been trying to study a little bit each night what we have learned that day or the day before. I am probably a little behind than everyone else, but it is my goal to catch up. The exercises and meeting with the tutor will help me do this along with studying alone. (S2)

Another student noted that meeting with the tutor was a great way to recap what was taught during the week. In discussing some of the difficulties Arabic students face, Ryding (2013) noted that "the crucial length difference between long and short vowels is a challenge for American learners to hear, recognize, and imitate because it is not phonemic (meaningful) in English" (p. 173). These pronunciation and sound challenges were reported by students in this study. One of the most common issues reported was the difficulty in spelling a word that contained short or long vowels, and words ending with the feminine marker *ة*. For example, [kəbɪr] (old) would be difficult because a student would not be able to recall whether there is a long vowel or a short vowel. Sounds that do not exist in English were reported as the most troublesome by students, which is clearly illustrated in the following excerpt:

I met with the tutor to work on pronunciation of words. We went over the key words on page 29, and I am getting much better at not adding additional sounds, distinguishing the sounds in each word, and pronouncing the sounds correctly. (S16)

Students indicated in their journals they could count on the tutor for additional help in case they encountered difficulties in the class.

Doing the practice towards the back of the book was really helpful. I am still having some trouble seeing written Arabic words and sounding them out. I am going to work on this with the tutor one day this week. (S4)

However, some students did not view tutoring as a support system to take their Arabic to the next level, but instead viewed it as a way to, as a few put it, to "fix problems" in their learning. While it is common for students to use tutoring sessions to work on language assignments, some still did not take full advantage of having a native speaker available to them who could provide opportunities for practicing conversations that otherwise would not be possible. The following excerpt highlights an example of the students speaking of problems being fixed:

I don't have any big trouble with the alphabet or connecting the letters. I like the tutor[ing] sessions with the tutor too because it allows me to get my problem areas fixed easily, and it makes me learn better and faster. (S6)

Students also noted in their journals that tutoring helped them improve their language development. As one student noted:

I feel like I'm starting to make progress. Last Friday while I was tutoring with the tutor, I was able to say a word aloud correctly without thinking too much about it. The language doesn't feel quite as strange coming out of my mouth as it did a month ago. (S9)

In terms of support, the following student noted how tutoring is invaluable in helping them learn:

I still feel like I'm improving. The tutoring sessions have really helped me and I'm so grateful they were available to me. It's great extra practice and I have more time to think about the words and come up with the answers on my own rather than [sic] get them from the more advanced students during class. (S9).

One student reported in their journal that tutoring did not help. It is possible the student had an issue the tutor could not identify, which could explain the statement below. The student, nonetheless, was optimistic that the tutor could help down the road if they faced "real problems." The student noted:

So far, the meetings with the tutor have not really helped much. I tried explaining that my problem is that I need more practice, but I don't think she understood. When I start to have real problems, however, I'm sure she will be very helpful. (S15)

The results of this study show that tutoring sessions can be rich learning experiences for language learners. The variety of topics that pertain to the language experience are diverse and provide information not routinely captured by assessments in the classroom. The moderate correlation between number of visits and students' final grades is another important result that highlights the value of tutoring sessions in helping students develop their language and improve the learning experience. The additional information that was collected shows that tutoring follows general patterns of learning, where students prioritize or take advantage of the tutoring available to them around their schedule, which can be seen by looking at days of tutoring sessions and length of time spent during each session.

Pedagogical Implications

The results of the present study can be useful for programs of critical languages. Generally speaking, these language programs tend to be smaller in size, usually do not lead to a major, and lack the wealth of resources available to frequently taught languages such as French and Spanish. Therefore, tutoring can be a conduit to sustain smaller language programs since it provides ongoing and out-of-class training that can help students build their confidence and language skills. In the case of this study, it is particularly important to note that having tutors who represent the target culture can also be a way for students to engage with speakers of the language and understand how the material learned in the classroom applies to the target culture, as represented by the tutor. Aside from the online opportunities available for students to interact with Arabic speakers, tutors may represent the only opportunity for learners to meet someone (other than program faculty) who speaks the language and represents the culture. This is particularly true for programs in less urban areas. In addition, the ability to interact with tutors whose Arabic is most likely different from the Arabic spoken in the classroom promotes the learning of culture and intercultural competence. According to Al-Batal (2018), "a curriculum based on 'Arabic as One' that integrates dialect is more conducive to helping students develop a broader and deeper understanding of Arab culture" (p. 10). This view of intercultural competence is also promoted in the work of Trentman (2021), who calls for a reframing of language learning in U.S. classrooms according to "plurilingual ideologies," which "recognize the value of all of the linguistic resources in an individual's linguistic repertoire" (p. 127). She argued that reframing language learning in U.S. classrooms according to plurilingual ideologies will better prepare students to engage with the plurilingual world around them. In sum, the positive impact of tutoring on learning gains, as shown in the present study, and, potentially, on intercultural competence may help learners of Arabic, who face unique difficulties in learning the language, and can be one of several tools to enhance the learning experience for Arabic students, especially those in small language programs with limited resources.

Suggestions for Future Research and Limitations

The results of this study indicate that several areas of tutoring and improved learning outcomes can still be further explored, including an emphasis on exploring the extent to which tutoring can be a conduit for successful spoken language development. As is the case with most language programs today, a greater emphasis is placed on pedagogical activities designed to improve speaking. Although the data revealed a positive correlation between attending the sessions and students' final grades, a student final grade is dependent on a variety of projects and assignments, several of which may not include spoken language development. Additionally, since vocabulary emerged as the most discussed topic, future research should explore ways in which spoken language development might be prioritized during tutoring in addition to other topics students bring up during (or bring to) the session.

These areas for further research reflect limitations in the scope and methodology of the paper. One limitation pertaining to the method of data collection is that the tutoring logs were not designed to capture detailed information about the tutoring sessions; instead, they were meant to provide a general idea of what the tutoring sessions entailed. Hence, they did not fully capture the extent of the interaction or learning that took place. In addition, students were strongly encouraged and expected to attend but were not required to participate in the tutoring. It might be worth exploring the extent to which results would be different had students been required to attend tutoring sessions. This could be explored by assigning grades for tutoring sessions attended or by requiring projects to be completed during tutoring. In terms of the limitation of the scope of the paper, future research may focus on the extent to which tutoring sessions might be linked to improved language proficiency rather than a final grade in the course. The tutoring sessions could prioritize speaking practice, for example, and could then be assessed for improvement in speaking outcomes. Tutoring, in this sense, can be examined as an additional resource for language speaking practice. One way this can be examined includes assigning tutoring sessions that focus on practicing oral skills, paired with ongoing assessment of students' speaking abilities throughout the semester. A main research question may investigate the extent to which time spent on spoken language during tutoring can be linked to improved speaking ability. Another approach could experiment with groups of learners who attend oral-focused tutoring sessions, and those who attend other types of tutoring and compare the performance of the oral-focused group. These results could help align tutoring with classroom practice and pedagogy and could establish tutoring as a bone fide element of Arabic language programs.

Conclusion

This study highlighted some of the benefits of utilizing tutors to energize and promote the study of languages and cultures. Overall, students benefited in terms of their language development, which can be seen in the positive link between the number of tutoring sessions they attended and their final course grades. In addition, students reported positive attitudes about language learning and the support they received from the language tutor. The study highlighted the benefits of any additional time spent working with the tutor, which allowed Arabic students to learn about the target culture as well as receive support on their journey of language learning. Considering the fact that tutors are usually relatively affordable and available, language programs should continue to invest in tutors in the domain of language learning. In addition to the favorable outcomes mentioned in the study, there are many other unquantifiable benefits that tutors bring to foreign language departments, including providing practical benefits to language programs. Furthermore, this study highlighted the importance of tutors who often relate well to students and can teach them about cultural values, which has been shown to build lasting friendships, tolerance, and cultural awareness and sensitivity. At the same time, extra effort should be given to communicative language support, not just grammar and vocabulary. This is especially true given the emphasis on high impact experiences in language study through development of meaningful oral proficiency skills, which are typically accomplished via study-abroad experiences. Thus, being able to practice the language with a language tutor can provide some of the study-abroad high-impact language exposure within the comfort of the institution.

Notes

1. Teacher in this sense does not necessarily refer to the instructor of record for a given class but to learners in advanced stages of language development, most commonly language tutors, who are typically advanced undergraduate students or teaching assistants/graduate students functioning as interlocutors for the purposes of helping students practice their language.
2. Each student is identified with an S and a number (1-25) arranged alphabetically.
3. This is likely a student typo: The student must have meant to write k when the sound should have been q, for *qamees*, the issue being q and k sounding close for a beginner Arabic course.

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