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# Teaching arabic as a foreign language: the importance of cultural awareness

La enseñanza del árabe como lengua extranjera:  
la importancia de la conciencia cultural

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## Abstract

Nowadays, learning foreign languages is envisaged as a priority within any Western curriculum, but most research has been conducted in dominant languages such as English or Spanish. Hence, our goal here is to focus on the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language and highlight the importance culture plays in its learning. Thus, using a comparative method, we have analysed several suwar in the Quran in order to elicit cultural information which can be used when teaching Arabic. Issues such as marriage, divorce, right of inheritance and freedom have been addressed. We also revised the cultural implications and policies in teaching Arabic in relation to diachronic analysis of Medieval Andalusian literature. Therefore, we conclude that teaching Arabic language and literature has to be contextualised and related to economical, socio-political, and especially cultural aspects where the religious rigidity would be overpassed and would help in extolling freedom of literary expression.

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Keywords: Arabic; teaching; culture; Al-Andalus; woman; literature; awareness

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## Resumen

Hoy en día, el aprendizaje de idiomas extranjeros se considera una prioridad dentro de cualquier currículo occidental, pero la mayoría de las investigaciones se han realizado en idiomas dominantes como el inglés o el español. Por lo tanto, nuestro objetivo aquí es enfocarnos en la enseñanza del árabe como idioma extranjero y resaltar la importancia de la cultura en su aprendizaje. Por eso, utilizando un método comparativo, hemos analizado varias suwar en el Corán para obtener información cultural que se pueda utilizar al enseñar árabe. Se han abordado temas como el matrimonio, el divorcio, el derecho de herencia y la libertad. También revisamos las implicaciones y las políticas culturales en la enseñanza del árabe en relación con el análisis diacrónico de la literatura medieval andalusí. En consecuencia, concluimos que la enseñanza de la lengua y la literatura árabes debe contextualizarse y relacionarse con los aspectos económicos, sociopolíticos y especialmente culturales, donde la rigidez religiosa se sobrepasaría y ayudaría a exaltar la libertad de expresión literaria.

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Palabras clave: árabe como lengua extranjera; enseñanza; cultura; Al-Ándalus; mujer; literatura; conciencia

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## Introduction

Teaching Arabic as a foreign language is not an easy task at all. Aside from the difficulties students face in memorising phonetics and graphemes used in pronouncing and recalling the vast vocabulary in the learning process, one of the most problematic aspects seems to be the adoption of the culture related to societies using Arabic as their first language. Bearing in mind that this language has co-existed with other European languages throughout its history, my goal is to present the cultural aspect of learning Arabic and Medieval Arabic literature created in Al-Andalus through the prism of the Quran.

The specific issues tackled in this paper focus on cultural awareness, religious submissiveness *versus* literary freedom related to the role of women in Medieval Al-Andalus, and their position in society. In this way I stress that culture is deeply rooted in the essence of the language, and it represents a key element in its comprehension.

Arabic, like any other language, serves as an agent in conveying culture and it is crucial in embodying cultural ties. The use of the language encompasses a string of different ideas that directly rely on the culture. The intertwining of the latter emerges as soon as a child starts to understand the concepts of the world surrounding him/her. This is the moment that the infant becomes an individual and begins to comprehend other individuals related (or not) to his/her cultural group. Xu (1997) asserts that the idea of all people being the same at birth is historically recorded by Confucius.

In order to correctly postulate culture as one of the most important factors in learning a foreign language, I refer to Brooks's definition (1986), which claims that the physical and the mental setup of all people is the same. The only thing that differs is the interactions between individuals or groups, respectively. These fluctuate from place to place, resulting in diverse patterns emerging from behaviours that are subsequently accepted or rejected. Thus, an individual having Arabic as their first language would react to external factors differently to a person with another first language. This indicates that students learning Arabic need to comprehend and accept Arab culture prior to or while learning the language in order to successfully understand notions and vocabulary (expressions above all) used while communicating. In this regard, Brooks (1986) asserts that language forms the basis of a specific culture, and Hantrais (1989) defines language as a vehicle of expression that transmits the idea of that particular culture, its beliefs and everyday practices as constituents of life.

Therefore, teaching Arabic as a second or a foreign language depends on the culture influencing learners. Emmitt and Pollock (1997) support this idea, stating that people speaking different languages have different perspectives of the world even if they were brought up in similar cultural backgrounds, and those who speak the same language are observed to have similar behavioural patterns. As a result, grasping the essence of Arabic can be enhanced by coming to know Arab culture.

Furthermore, Emmitt and Pollock (1997) reaffirm that language is reflected in culture, and consequently culture is passed from generation to generation by that same language. The connection between language and culture is elucidated by Allwright and Bailey (1991), who assure us that learning a new language is not just learning grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, but also implies learning a new culture.

Therefore, undoubtedly, teaching Arabic is intertwined with the cultural background of speakers who use it as first language. In this sense, language teachers need to indicate that the cultural background of the Arab ethnos is very important in exploring linguistic differences rooted in the historical and present development of the language. Thus, appropriate styles should be selected when instructing students how to perceive and comprehend certain stereotypes in order to avoid misunderstanding and sustain prejudices that can lead to misconceptions of a broad and intertwined culture such as the Arab culture. In this respect, Byram (1989) stresses that language teachers are also culture teachers. Consequently, language and literature classes must be used as a pathway to creating awareness and understanding differences that come as a by-product of combining cultural values, as well as incorporating them as a didactical material in the subjects taught.

## Methodology

This study represents a combination of a diachronic analysis of the social system in the Middle Ages in Al-Andalus and language learning processes. My purpose herein was

to explore the didactical importance of teaching Arab culture as a vehicle to understanding language and literature. The comparative method helped me to uncover the hidden discourses in the primary text – the Quran.

The qualitative investigation was developed as a result of direct observation of specific segments in the above-mentioned literary work and resulted in descriptive analysis of the findings. This helped me to draw conclusions by reflecting on and comparing the collected data. Consequently, the qualitative process of investigation was not linear and does not carry a strict sequence as the quantitative process does.

The elements that I was looking for in the Hadith made it possible to obtain data which was subsequently converted into information regarding individuals, agents of communication (addressee, reader), as well as situations and contexts of events that lead to a certain behaviour generating cultural matrices. When talking about individuals in a given context, there were some concepts that were of interest, such as: perceptions, mental and descriptive imagery, beliefs, emotions, interactions, thoughts, experiences, processes and life situations manifested in a certain language of the involved parties. These characteristics on occasions were manifested in an individual manner and sometimes reflected collective behaviour and thoughts, giving insight into the cultural awareness of the time.

The evaluation of the samples incorporates qualitative variables which could be nominal or qualities whose categories do not have pre-established order, such as sex, gender, ethnic and religious background etc.; and ordinal, whose characteristics and/or qualities do incorporate a pre-established order, such as classification or level of involvement of a certain topic, social sphere, educational level, engagement in social activities, etc.

Other units of analysis that I incorporated into this research pointed to individuals and the meanings of events in the qualitative process of investigation. The latter refer to linguistic referents that are used by the “actors” to allude to social life as definitions, stereotypes and ideologies. Rules and norms can be deduced from the meanings shared within a given group. Also of use in my research are the practices. This means analysing the social system that had created something like a routine in respect of life itself, reflected in the writing, translating into rituals such as practising a religion, praying, etc. However, practices sometimes include dramatic events that should not be understood as a routine, as they can be quite disturbing and incorporate traumatic experiences. Thus, they are considered as episodes, their effects on individuals are diverse and they may occur as a result of any type of accident, divorces, social rejection, rejection by the beloved one, etc. These events are also relevant for this qualitative study.

In addition, I made a comparison with western thought, and considered authors whose ideology helped to decode certain elements related to teaching Arabic as a foreign language, stressing the importance of the cultural background. In the process, I also paid special attention to certain elements of religious and secular life. During the analysis I interpreted different aspects of the social and the cultural sectors of Al-Andalus, referring directly to the position of women and their inclusion/exclusion in/from society.

The analysis of the corpus was done by searching and identifying those parameters that represent social interaction between both sexes, their way of thinking, beliefs, particularities and affections. This meant undertaking a process to determine the gender stereotypes that were reflected upon Andalusian society as a result of different

aspects of social interaction, as well as the degree of (in)tolerance of said interaction. These crucial elements are of a great value and are an important aspect of the language learning process, prompting an increase in cultural awareness and its importance while teaching and learning the language.

## **Analysis and results**

Pennycook (2013) argues that cultural practice is reflected in language as the process of thinking and language itself can be traced back to civilisation, as well as to social and political context. Thus, considering the current situation in the Arab world, it is quite challenging to teach Arabic language and literature even in a historical context. The cultural predisposition that this ethos (Arabs) carries is tightly bound to the Quran and the teachings of the Hadith. In this paper, I would therefore like to stress the position of women in Al-Andalus, which can help in presenting linguistic patterns, and aid a greater understanding of Arab culture in those times. I am going to elaborate issues related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, women in law and politics as well as their socio-cultural involvement and exclusion through the prism of the Holy Scripture, in contrast to the cultural framework of teachers. Finally, I will discuss implications and policies in teaching Arabic in relation to a diachronic analysis of medieval Andalusian literature.

## **Cultural Implications and Policies in Teaching Arabic in Relation to the Diachronic Analysis of Medieval Andalusian Literature**

When teaching the Arabic language, especially the medieval literature of Al-Andalus, teachers should instruct their students that the cultural background is one of the most important factors in learning a new language. This means that if a language is taught without pointing out the importance of the cultural aspects where the language in question is set, students may not comprehend meaning correctly. In other words, learning Arabic is not just memorising graphemes, vocabulary and grammar, but incorporates elements of everyday life as well as historical ones related to the existence of the Arab ethnoses. Thus, the symbols that might seem meaningless to students take on life and attaching incorrect meaning can be reduced to a minimum. Consequently, what students have learned is not conveyed in erroneous cultural contexts while using the language actively.

Inappropriate teaching styles can also lead to conflicts stemming from the differences related to the language and the culture of both students and teachers. That is to say, teachers bring their own culture to the classroom, and through that their own didactical methods, which sometimes creates difficulties in the teaching, resulting in students not feeling comfortable. Therefore, introducing appropriate didactic methodology is crucial. Pennycook (1994) argues that the western educational system is student-centred, while the Asian is teacher-centred. This can also create general misunderstanding in the case of a native Arabic teacher. This being said, in western civilisation a teacher-based approach is not recommended, as students are not accustomed to this and could reject the teacher, not knowing how respond to a teaching style that is so unfamiliar to them. By rejecting the teacher, they reject the language taught.

Middle Eastern teacher at first may find it difficult to directly interact with students due to his/her cultural background, in which it is not customary for a teacher to approach students in a friendly manner. Middle Eastern students tend to be well behaved and listen attentively to their teachers without interrupting. Murray (1982) argues that Middle Eastern students refuse to interact freely and conduct informal discussions with the teacher, and do not recognize him as a friend. In other words, it is culturally unacceptable for Middle Eastern students and teachers to mutually interact in an informal manner. This teaching method will fail in western countries.

Conducting an Arabic class in a more relaxed atmosphere will result in students feeling uninhibited and open to mutual conversation, which can be achieved by accepting their cultural differences. Engelbet (2004) asserts that teaching a foreign language equals teaching the culture of the language in question. Thus, it is very important to take into consideration the culture of the language taught as well as the cultural background of the students. Most of the time, students and teachers come from different cultures. This includes intertwining different values that are closely related to the culture itself. Therefore, it is also important for Arabic teachers to be sensitive to students' culture as they might not share equal paradigms culture-wise. Unlike many western cultures, Middle Eastern ones are family based. Individualism is not likely to be prevalent in them, as focus on the family is highly valued. Family ties play an important role in their society, which are reflected in the use of the language, as well as in the literature. That is to say, if a family member commits a crime or has undesired behaviour, they embarrass the entire family. This concept must be understood in order to correctly use Arabic in a cultural context and to be cautious in analysing works produced by authors coming from this culture. Hence, teaching methods must be revised in order to prompt culturally appropriate interaction inside and outside the classroom. Spence (1985) elaborates the physiological importance of culturally acceptable and unacceptable patterns, and he points out that Middle Eastern culture as a set of sociological patterns influences not only the individual but the entire family or collective each person belongs to. Therefore, teachers have to bear in mind not only their own culture, but also those of the students and the culture they are teaching, in this case Arabic. Teachers have to explain the complexity of intertwining cultural frameworks, and make sure students understand that most of the time cultural, sociological and linguistic patterns are prone to interpretation.

Another important aspect that teachers need to be aware of is that meaning is tightly connected to the cultural context. Thus, they should explain that the language used will depend on the context, especially when working on diachronic analysis of Arabic and its literature. Hence, teaching Arabic language, literature and culture in Andalusia (Spain) – where, due to historical and present circumstances and events, students might have a greater understanding of Arab culture – is not the same as teaching Arabic in Nordic countries where the population has never come into contact with the culture in question. Porter (1987) asserts that cultural boundaries will affect the argument, as ideologies based on cultural predisposition restrict expression. Students' cultural differences may result in learning the didactic units in different ways.

Hui (2005) argues that in western cultures free speech is the most common method when it comes to memorizing vocabulary and practical grammar usage. The phraseology and grammar sequences used determine individuals' place in the group, and attitudes reflect the cultural framework of society (Prodromou, 1988). When it comes

to the didactic material used, teachers must carefully revise the units they introduce based on the cultural predispositions and views of their students, because their interpretation will differ as learners always have a tendency to compare the aspects they learn with those from their own culture. Teachers must therefore also be aware that books and other types of reading material are not always open to interpretation, as in Asian cultures these are perceived as providers of wisdom, bearers of knowledge and the embodiment of truth, whereas in western culture books are seen as pages containing facts and information (Maley, 1986).

For this reason, the differences between both languages, students' mother tongue and Arabic, should be both compared and contrasted in order to properly visualise and comprehend the differences between both. This will enable students to appropriately identify cultural differences and coordinate the idiosyncrasies arising from language use. Therefore, it is advisable for teachers to be familiar with both languages and cultures. Hence, Arabic can be used as the language of instruction, and the native tongue of the students as an instrumental language. Knowing both languages and cultures will result in students understanding Arabic better both as a target language and its culture. This way they will avoid inappropriate phraseology and idiomatic expressions, which in given circumstances are differently understood in the contrasted languages. From here, teacher's knowledge of both cultures and corresponding languages transforms into a powerful tool in transferring contrasts and similarities between Arabic and the native language (Valdes, 1986).

Stromquist and Monkman (2000) advocate that those who are responsible for creating policies related to second-language learning have to be sensitive not only to the target but also to the first language. In this era of globalisation, the tendencies concerning homogeneity must be observed, especially taking into consideration the values and the norms of both cultures and languages. These newly created policies should place the cultural background of the native and the target language on the same footing, not giving priority to either. Equalising both cultures, along with their distinctive complexities, translates into promoting better cultural understanding and linguistic comprehension. In other words, teaching policies need to encompass cultural values coming from present and past societies where Arab culture has flourished, comparing and contrasting them to the language and the culture where Arabic is taught. Furthermore, the cultural ideologies of teachers and students are equally important as reviewing and interconnecting those cultural characteristics will improve comprehension (Engelbert 2004). In this way, erroneous assumptions related to taboos and dogmas will be circumvented, resulting in increased cultural awareness.

The American National Research Council (1996) advocates expanding the language-teaching curriculum with culture-related topics in order to facilitate the understanding of singularities comprised by different cultures, their languages, ethnos and ideologies. Moreover, when teaching Arabic in a diachronic context, especially literature created in Al-Andalus, the above-mentioned particularities are to be elaborated, carefully stressing, for example, the position of women as a crucial element in understanding medieval Arab cultural background. Language-learning policies must instruct teachers to advocate cultural awareness by applying interactive didactic methods in order to encourage students' mutual interaction, as well as direct student-teacher communication without fear of being wrongly understood.

## Women in Al-Andalus versus Teachers' Cultural Framework

It is of the utmost importance for teachers to instruct their students that learning a language is deeply connected to the cultural background. If a teacher conducts an Arabic class and does not teach about the culture the language carries within itself, and the culture where it operates, it is akin to teaching meaningless symbols and phrases that do not make sense to students from other backgrounds. Thus, they most often correlate an incorrect meaning to what they learn. Not having absorbed the correct cultural context, they fail to process the appropriate usage of Arabic. In this sense, teachers need to explain to their students that not only does society *per se* play a huge role in creating a language, but religion also has its part – particularly in Arab countries where Islam is the state religion and from which most laws derive. In the case of teachers of Arabic, when focusing on Arabic and Medieval literature, they have to make sure that their students understand that the most prominent and most widespread religion in the Middle Ages in Al-Andalus was Islam. With this in mind, I will now address the religious connotation of women.

The Muslim point of view towards women and their inclusion/exclusion in society should take primary place in teaching, and the presentation should encompass analysis of passages of the Quran indicating the rights of women in accordance with previously set norms which affected, and still affect, the social interaction of females. For example, there is a physical separation of women from the world of men. However, although significantly marked in Islam, this separation does not come directly from it, but rather it was “imported” from Judaism where the separation of sexes was more prominent. Thus, students of Arabic must understand that some rules are not directly connected to Islam. Instead, they were imposed and integrated into the Arab culture. According to Judaism, “women were separated from public places, including religious places” (Garrido et al., 1997, p. 150). Following this rule, Jews would exclude women from all aspects of public life, whereas Muslims would permit women to be present in religious buildings but following the primary rule: the women’s section of the mosques had to be completely separated from the men’s. Although the religious facilities would be accessible to Muslim women, their presence in all other public buildings would be forbidden, as well as participation in jurisdiction, politics and other public affairs (Del Moral et al., 1993).

The separation of women from the ‘men’s world’ finds its roots in religion, but we have to see from which moment this issue takes such a great importance in the social separation of women. The answer may lie in the very beginning of the Bible, more precisely in the Book of Genesis where the original sin is described. As Christians and Jews have the Old Testament as a mutual Holy Scripture, the importance of the separation of women by them would be understood differently by Muslims who have a dissimilar interpretation for the same original sin. Thus, Muslims would be more tolerant towards women and allow their presence primarily in religious life, and secondly in the rest of public affairs. The difference in the interpretation of Original Sin is that Muslims believe that there is a certain equality of guilt when both Adam and Eve took a bite from the apple. Besides, “in Mohammed’s time women had major leadership” (Garrido et al., 1997, p. 150); and it should also be considered that “in the Prophet’s family the female line predominated, as he did not have male successors who had survived” (Garrido et al., 1997, p. 150).

Discussing these issues can create conflicts if an inappropriate style is used. Western students immersed in their own cultural framework do not comprehend this cultural



difference, and it may produce prejudices against the teacher. Arab teachers working outside their own countries bring their teaching experience with them, which differs hugely from that of western teachers. This may mean that they employ the same methodology they used in their countries of origin, which sometimes in the western world is not completely understood. Paying more attention to male than to female students in Europe is not socially acceptable, as the western teaching system is, as Pennycook (2013) asserts, student-centred, which means all students (male, female, transgender or transsexual) have to communicate with each other and the teacher.

Teachers and students may come from different countries with different religious, political and social backgrounds. What teachers understand to be acceptable depends on students' interpretation. Hence, meaning is to be taken from the cultural context. Thus, it is not only necessary to explain the meaning of the unit presented, but it is also essential to elaborate the cultural context in which that situation is or was set. When discussing a certain literary text written by an Arabic author, influenced by religious canons, students often come across questions they fail to contextualise with regard to their different way of thinking. One example can be the dilemma which seems to be interconnected with the beliefs of men and women, resulting in the question of who is more capable of understanding and interpreting religion. The answer was always intricate and it was thought that women were more inclined to mysticism and religion, while men were better at understanding religion, though women more sensitive in perceiving it (Grozdanoski, 2014).

The result was uneven and finally the conclusion was that all human beings, men and women, are equal in front of God, and hence both can hold their place in religion. Following this fact, men and women equally can be believers and that means sharing the obligations and merits of the religious life. However, it was not always like that, and religious practices were always shaped in accordance with the sex the individual belonged to. One of the most important obligations in Islam is ritual cleansing, which means washing those body parts that are considered unclean, prescribed in Surah 6, verse 7:

O ye who believe! When you stand up for a Prayer, wash your faces, and your hands up to the elbows, and pass your wet hands over your heads, and wash your feet to the ankles. And if you be unclean, purify yourselves by bathing. And if you are ill or you are on a journey while unclean, or one of you comes from a privy or you have touched women, and you find not water, betake yourselves to pure dust and wipe therewith your faces and your hands. Allah desires not that He should place you in a difficulty, but He desires to purify you and to complete His favour upon you, so that you may be grateful (Sher, 2004, p. 117).

If the prayer was conducted in the mosque or in other public places "it was sufficient to wash the hands and the face" (Garrido et al., 1997, p. 150). Furthermore, during prayer women had to take an appropriate place to position themselves for the upcoming service:

They had to be separated from the men. If they were married, they would position themselves behind the boys and the young men; or if on the contrary they were single, particularly if they were virgins, they had to be positioned in a place completely invisible men and away from indiscreet looks (Garrido et al., 1997, p. 150).

Religion advocates that men and women are equal in front of God, and both sexes would have the same religious and moral tasks to perform in this world, and in the Ākhirah (afterlife) all would have the same rewards and punishments. Although equal from a religious and moral point of view, the woman is always, without exception, considered inferior to man, particularly in the judicial system and in politics. Both freedoms and the rights of women, and the rights that men had over women in Al-Andalus, were based on the Quran. They were bound to its interpretation.

Another aspect that is important for this study is the issue of marriage and divorce, since the family unit in the Arab world is vital. Sometimes westerners, depending on their country of origin, do not completely understand how this issue may affect not only the individual, but the entire family. Spence (1995) asserts that the failure of an individual disrupts the cultural framework and influences the whole family rather than just the person who perpetrated the inappropriate deed. A crime or sin committed by an individual embarrasses the family itself and it is marked for life. Thus, when discussing family ties, it has to be explained that the western standpoint on marriage and divorce does not correspond to the Arab one, especially not to a remote medieval culture such as Al-Andalus.

Marriage in Al-Andalus was equally rightful for free women as for slaves and maids, although the latter two always belonged to a man. In this regard, a man was to choose a woman by his own will, but he was always to choose a woman with faith. This is cited in Surah 4, verse 26: "And whoso of you cannot afford to marry free, believing women, let him marry what your right hands possess, namely, your believing handmaids" (Sher, 2004, p. 87). By the words of Allah, all people are equal and all deserve the same right to get married, provided they are believers: "And Allah knows your faith best; you are all one from another" (Sher, 2004, p. 87). The dowry was also an important part of marriage and it was provided according to the man's possibilities (Grozdanoski, 2014).

As religion was above everything, it was even advised to better marry a slave who was a believer than a woman who was not. Although this primarily concerned women, the same was valid for men and by no means was a believing woman to be married to an idolater. This is as much an order for men regarding marriage as for the families of the believing women who were not to give their daughters to a man without faith in Allah (Sher, 2004).

In Surah 4, Verse 23, we can read the following: "And marry not those women whom your fathers married, except what has already passed. It is a thing foul and hateful and an evil way" (Sher, 2004, p. 86). This was considered a dishonest thing and was not to be undertaken except in the event that it had happened before a man could gain knowledge from the Quran that this was not acceptable. If the marriage was already concluded, men were not to leave their wives as that would again be considered a dishonourable thing.

Incest as such was also prohibited by the Quran. This prohibition can be seen in Surah 4, verse 24, where all female members of one extended family are listed:

Forbidden to you are your mothers, and your daughters, and your sisters, and your fathers' sisters, and your mothers' sisters. And brother's daughters, and sister's daughters, and your foster-mothers that have given you a suck, and your foster-sister, and the mothers of your wives, and your step-daughters, who are your wards by wives unto whom you have gone in – but if you have not gone unto them, there shall be no sin

upon you – and the wives of your sons that are from your lions; and it is forbidden to you to have two sisters in marriage, except what already passed (Sher, 2004, p. 86).

Surah 4, verse 25, orders that married women have the right to be with their lawful husbands and no one was allowed to take them away from their husbands by force: “And forbidden to you are married women”. However, there is one more exception in favour of men: “except such as your right hand possess. This has Allah enjoined on you”. If married women were forbidden to men, the rest of single women were free to be married if a man chose them: “And allowed to you are those beyond that, that seek them by means of your property, marrying them properly and not committing fornication”. This line clearly states that sexual intercourse was not allowed before the marriage alliance was concluded, even if it was certain that they would soon be husband and wife. However, the same verse complicates things, as it cites: And for the benefit you receive from them their dowries, as fixed, and there shall be no sin for you in anything you mutually agree upon, after the fixing of the dowry (Sher, 2004, p. 87).

Islam is not a monogamous religion, meaning that marriage could be undertaken between one man and various women. However, one woman is not allowed to have more than one husband. In this respect, there is another rule in the Quran which refers to men who have various wives. In Surah 4, verse 130, it is written that all a man's wives cannot be treated equally and there should always be some to whom more attention would be paid. Therefore, the following is more a piece of advice rather than a rule addressed to men: “And you cannot keep perfect balance between wives, however much you may desire it. But incline not wholly to one so that you leave the other like a thing suspended” (Sher, 2004, p. 105).

The Quran also addresses orphan girls in relation to marriage, who were not to be treated differently only because they had no parents.

And so does that which is recited to you in the Book concerning the orphan girls whom you give not what is prescribed for them and whom you desire to marry, and concerning the weak among children (Sher, 2004, pp. 104-105).

That is to say, orphan girls were to be treated as any other women, and if a man was to be married to one of them, he had to provide for her in the same way as he would provide for a girl who had parents. The verse ends saying that orphans needed to be treated equally and respectfully as “Allah enjoins you to observe equity towards the orphans” (Sher, 2004, pp. 104-105).

From the right of marriage, we move on to that concerning divorce. Surah 2, verse 228, supports the issue of divorce and gives right to both men and women to decide whether to divorce or not. Here we can notice that the wish of Allah is not to punish either of them if they decide to separate as that would be their decision based on specific reasons. Thereby it is written: “And if they decide upon divorce, then surely, Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing” (Sher, 2004, p. 37).

However, divorce was not as easy as it seems in the previous verse. Surah 2, verse 229, describes when a woman could divorce her husband. It was not so much her decision to make, but depended on other factors such as, for example, the state she was in, meaning it had to be clear that she was not bearing a child when the divorce was about to happen. “And the divorced woman shall wait concerning themselves for three courses”, as it was considered a sin if they hid their pregnancy because Allah is the creator of all things in the world and no individual has right to hide His creations: “and

it is not lawful for them that they conceal what Allah has created in their wombs, if they believe in Allah and the Last Day” (Sher, 2004, p. 37). In any case, in this situation both men and women had similar rights to decide whether to get back together or not, although the final word was the man’s: “And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them in equity; but men have a rank above them” (Sher, 2004, p. 37).

However, if a decision for separation was made, it could only be done twice, as the Quran does not allow ill-treatment of women. Thus, verse 230 of the second surah explains about women’s rights, rather than their obligations. However, men could not change their minds over and over again, and they could divorce their wives only twice, not taking them back and sending them away perpetually (Sher, 2004). This verse also orders that men should treat women with kindness and by that send them away or take them back in a proper manner. As it was very common for men to give gifts to women, by divorcing them it was not allowed for men to take away the gifts as now they belonged to the women and were their property (Sher Alī 2004). So, here we have one more example of the rights women had according to the Quran. However, regarding these properties, there is a warning, since the gifts could imply transgressing the limits prescribed by Allah and in that case men could decide to take the gifts away to fulfil their God’s will (Sher, 2004, pp. 37-38). On the other hand, women were also given the right to decide to give the gifts back to their husbands for the same reason or to “get her freedom” (Sher, 2004, pp. 37-38).

In Surah 2, verse 231 it is written:

And if he divorces her the third time, then she is not lawful for him thereafter, until she marries another husband; and if he also divorces her, then it shall be no sin for them to return to each other (Sher, 2004, p. 38).

After a woman had divorced her subsequent husband she could go back to the previous one and marry him again. Marrying the first husband was also according to what Allah prescribed, and further on in the verse it is noted: “provided they are sure that they would be able to observe the limits prescribed by Allah which He makes clear to the people who have knowledge” (Sher, 2004, p. 38).

A divorced woman should be treated with respect and after the prescribed period had passed, the man could decide to take her back, and if he did so, he needed to continue to treat her with the respect she deserved. It was mandatory that he did not have bad intentions or plan ill-treatment towards her (Sher, 2004). In the event that he decided to send her away, he was to do so respectfully and was not to do her any harm in the process, because he is prohibited to hurt women either physically or psychically.

Surah 2, verse 233, reports that after a woman divorced from the second husband, and if he did not wish to take her back, he was not allowed to prevent her to marry the first husband again if they both agreed to do so. This clearly demonstrates that women could decide whether they would like to go back to their first husband, stay with the second, or marry another man.

And when you divorce women and they reach the end of their period, prevent them not from marrying their husbands, if they agree between themselves in a decent manner. This is an admonition for him among you who believes in Allah and the Last Day (Sher, 2004, p. 39).

In any case, prior to whatever decision was to be made, both men and women were advised to reconcile as that was the best thing to do and not to rush into a divorce.

And if a woman fear ill-treatment or indifference on the part of her husband, it shall be no sin on them that they suitably reconciled each other; and reconciliation is the best. And people are prone to covetousness (Sher, 2004, p. 105).

The divorce could be postponed if a man suspected that his wife might be pregnant. It was in his right, or rather, it was his duty to wait for three subsequent months. Surah 64, verse 5, posits:

And if you are in doubt as to such of your women as despair of monthly courses, then know that the prescribed period for them is three months, and the same is for such as have not had their monthly courses yet (Sher, 2004, pp. 673-674).

The same verse also takes into consideration women who are evidently pregnant although their waiting period was considerably different and depended on the day when they were to give birth: And as for those who are with child, their period shall be until they are delivered of their burden (Sher, 2004, pp. 673-674).

There is also a rule in Surah 2, verse 235, concerning widows. Although a woman was left without a husband, she was not to be married immediately after her husband's death. There was also a period prescribed which should be respected if a woman wished to get married again:

And those of you who die and leave wives behind, these (wives) shall wait concerning themselves four months and ten days. And when they have reached the end of their period, no sin shall lie on you in anything that they do with regard to themselves according to what is fair (Sher, 2004, p. 39).

As issues such as marriage and divorce differ from one to another culture, it is essential to point out to students that marital rights mirror the mental codex people have. It depends on their personal beliefs or the religious and social norms imposed by the state. It is important to respect everyone's cultural values in multi-ethnic settings. Engelbert (2004) insists on considering students' sensitivity, their families and surroundings, as well as whether the cultural paradigms they share coincide with ours.

Other rights that women had in Al-Andalus concerned their goods and inheritance. Namely, a man could decide to choose a woman over another, but if that was the case, the man was not to take away the 'treasures' he had given to one of them by manipulation of any sort. This is cited in Surah 4, verse 21. "And if you desire to take one wife in place of another and you have given one of them a treasure, take not aught therefrom. Will you take it by lying and with manifest sinfulness" (Sher, 2004, p. 86). Also, before leaving the woman, she was to be given her dowry:

Settled for them a dowry. But provide for them – the rich man according to his means and the poor man according to his means – a provision in becoming manner, an obligation upon the virtuous (Sher, 2004, p. 40).

The issue regarding the dowry the woman was entitled to, continues in Surah 2, verse 238:

And if you divorce them before you have touched them, but have settled for them a dowry, then half of what you have settled shall be due from you, unless they remit, or he, in whose hand is the tie of marriage, should remit. And that you should remit is nearer to righteousness. And do not forget to do good to one another (Sher Alī 2004, p. 40).

Widows whose husbands passed away were also entitled to inheritance and were not to be left without provision after losing their husbands. This is very accurately recorded in Surah 2, verse 241: "And those of you who die and leave behind wives shall bequeath to their wives' provision for a year without their being turned out" (Sher, 2004, pp. 40-41). However, after they had lost their husbands, they were free to do whatever they considered moral regarding themselves and men were not to be prescribed any sin if they (the women) decided to do the right thing: "But if they themselves go out, there shall be no blame upon you in regard to any proper thing which they do concerning themselves" (Sher, 2004, pp. 40-41). Neither were divorced women to be excluded – Surah 2, verse 242: "And for the divorced women also there should be provision according to what is fair – and obligation on the God-fearing" (Sher, 2004, p. 41).

The fourth surah is entitled *Al-Nisā'*, which literally means women. This surah got its name due to the fact that throughout it there are many references to women and their welfare.

The issue of inheritance, having been raised in the second surah, continues in the fourth by explaining when and how women were entitled to have their share out of marriage or the division of goods that the family possessed when still unmarried. In Surah 4 we see how inheritance is provisioned even when talking about male and female children in the same family.

In any family, the male child always had supremacy over his female siblings and Surah 4, verse 12, is all about Allah's commandments, and how he determined that the inheritance should be divided: "Allah commands you concerning your children; a male shall have as much as the share of two females" (Sher, 2004, p. 84). The Holy Scripture also had a rule for when there was not a male heir in the family and there were only females, "but if there be females only, numbering more than two, then they shall have two-thirds of what the deceased leaves" (Sher, 2004, p. 84). In case there was just one female heir, the rule was: "and if there be one, she shall have the half" (Sher, 2004, p. 84).

When there was a female heir, she could not have all the goods her father had, and they were to be divided between her and her father's parents: "And his parents shall have each of them a sixth of the inheritance, if he have a child" (Sher, 2004, p. 84). "But if he has no child and his parents be his heirs, then his mother shall have a third" (Sher, 2004, p. 84), and again we can see that the mother could have only one third, which shows her subjugated position. Moreover, if he had siblings, they were to have a part of the inheritance, and the mother would be left with a sixth of the inheritance after a part was given to the siblings and paying debts (if any): "if he has brothers and sisters, then his mother shall have a sixth, after the payment of any bequeathed or debt" (Sher, 2004, p. 84).

I now move on to elaborate issues concerning women, law and politics – their social involvement and exclusion. The primary source concerning the law and politics in Al-Andalus was the Quran. Islam explicitly demanded that women be excluded from public administration as well as from the rest of public services. By analogy, this would

mean stripping them of all the power they might have and leaving public life to men only (Reina 2007). Islam in Al-Andalus was set as the state religion, and all the laws and political views were subject to the writings in the Quran and the religion itself (Grozdanoski, 2014). Political power was therefore concentrated within the religious codex, leading to the fact that power itself could be classified as political and religious respectively, both being completely masculine duties in which women had no part (Reina, 2007). This being the case, in Muslim society religious and political power were united and personified in the caliph. Thus, he was simultaneously chief of state and head of the religious community. As a consequence, women were not allowed to take a leading position. Whatever power and influence women might have had in Al-Andalus, there are no instances of women as chief of state (caliph or emir). Garrido et al. (1997) assert that

In the history of Al-Andalus there are series of important women who influenced political events. These women belonged to families of governors, emirs, caliphs or kings of taifas. All of them lived in the courts, but they were never assigned any political function (p. 146).

Furthermore, these same authors investigate accurately and discuss the question of women's inclusion in politics, which is to some extent uncertain. Most often, they would be considered as someone who made intrigues, resulting in accusations against them because they were not accomplishing the entrusted functions, and were interfering with men's work (Garrido et al., 1997). Reina (2007) states that the list of women partially involved in public life is not long. One example is Sab, the mother of Hisham III, who had an important role in Almanzor's ascent; the mother of Boabdil, who made a lot of sacrifices, and she led to lot of battles in order to secure and maintain the power of her son in Granada as well as to avoid the Christian invasion. Most of these women were mothers, but there were also wives who would intervene in or advise their husbands in state matters. Another example is a woman called Itmad, who was the wife of Al-Mu'tamid of Seville (Reina, 2007). She was considered to have had a major influence on her husband. Besides being married to Al-Mu'tamid, she was a prolific poetess and part of what she wrote might have influenced the king (Reina, 2007).

Having been excluded from all public functions, women had no opportunities to express their opinion, nor to intervene directly in any matters that would affect the population in general. Thus all those 'incognito' warnings to their men were just occasional, and played a small role in the overall political condition. Not being able to act as judges, alfaquis or any other public office, there was no chance for them to make any changes and have their voice heard in institutions, due to their prohibition even to enter in such places alone, and on their own will.

## Discussion and conclusions

Understanding the constant manipulations of women's destiny and faith in Al-Andalus, it becomes clear that they were de facto controlled by men. Males had supremacy over the flow of events, and would interpret the laws in the Quran to their benefit. In the Dark Ages and in a world dominated by Islam, Al-Andalus represented a bright spot where to a certain level there was tolerance and inter-human relationships and relations were nourished. The plexus of cultures and traditions helped women to express their own opinion, although not as much as men of course, always playing the



role of a secondary being subject to men's will. Pointing out these circumstances to students will contribute to articulating speech correctly, and help them to consider consequences of inappropriate language use in relation to the historical contextualisation of women.

Apart from the seclusion and who had the supremacy, we have seen when and how marriages could be concluded. Consequently, the issue of divorce was treated where I explained what those implied, and how they were handled. This gives an insight not only into the life of women, but also into the judicial system in Al-Andalus, which was entirely based on the rules of the Quran. I conclude that all legal matters and divorce itself were subject to interpretation of the Holy Scripture. This allowed a certain freedom in interpreting the laws, and through this implementing punishment based on the individual perception of the same laws by men. As far as inheritance was concerned, it is evident that women were not treated as equals to men. Having seen how inheritance was distributed, I conclude that although in a subjugated position, women in Al-Andalus did have some rights.

When belongings were distributed, Allah made sure that at least some part of the goods were to be given to all female members of the family, which stresses the original wish of Islam to promote women's rights to some extent. As a result, elaborating didactical units related to women's rights and freedoms will contribute to better comprehension of the Arabic language and the use of expressions that could reduce intolerance and prompt cultural comprehension and appreciation.

In the section concerning law and politics of Al-Andalus, I examined women's inclusion and exclusion. Here it is made clear that men, as in all spheres of life, had the leading position. Although conduct was prescribed by the Quran, and women could not interfere with state matters, there is some evidence that states otherwise. There are indications that women were involved in politics (albeit in the background) and therefore I conclude that those were the beginnings of women's emancipation as well as their power to act from behind the scenes and intervene in public matters prohibited to them. As much as women were included in social life, I cannot say with certainty to what extent they were involved in decision-making processes and the creation of policies.

However, the fact that women contributed to the overall development of Andalusian society is undeniable. Consequently, those are some of the elements teachers have to pay attention to while teaching Arabic. Identifying matrices, codices, particularities and singularities helps in assimilating culture. These processes improve performance in the correct diachronic analysis of literature.

Lastly, I conclude that culture and language cannot exist without one another. They are tightly intertwined, making them an inseparable part of any civilisation. Thus, it is not possible to teach Arabic without introducing didactic units related to the cultural background of the ethnos. Teaching implications and policies are necessary in order to correctly transfer the essence of the language, its literature and culture. Teachers considering all socio-political aspects, rejecting stereotypes and taking into account students' backgrounds, translates into the understanding of the differences and the diversity of Arabic and local culture where the language is being taught. Hence, language policies should bear in mind potential linguistic misunderstandings, prescribing erroneous interpretations and prompting cultural awareness of Arab civilisation.



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