

# Arabic as A Foreign Language: A Case Study on Expatriates in KSA

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**Abstract.** The present paper describes how expatriates of different linguistic backgrounds cope with the Arabic language differently during their stay in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Linguistically, the expatriates here can be divided into two distinct categories; (1) those, for whom Arabic is not a foreign language; (2) those, for whom Arabic is a foreign language. The study analyzes the functional level of the Arabic language in category 2. Multiple sociolinguistic factors are responsible for learning or acquiring Arabic as an ASL, AFL, ALF, or ALL amongst the non-Arabic expatriates in KSA. The paper describes how the incomplete/ partial linguistic competency among the expatriates sometimes extended into a full-fledged skill- in the case of (A) those who stayed here longer for generations and could not return to their native place. (B) Those who go back to the native site forever as their job tenure is over. In both cases, language loss occurs; In terms of the case (A) First language loss is observed, on the other hand, in case (B) incomplete or partial (Arabic) language competency is lost. The persisting situation demands realistic affirmative action collectively.

**Keyword:** ASL (Arabic as a Second Language), AFL (Arabic as a Foreign Language), ALF (Arabic as a Lingua Franca), ALL (Arabic as a Liturgical Language)

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## 1 Introduction

This paper was first presented as a talk in the monthly seminar, Department of English language, Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah. My aim to present this paper was to unfold the level of linguistic proficiency among the non-native speakers of Arabic in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss Arabic language skills among non-Arabic expatriates in the Kingdom. This text is to figure out how foreigners, coming from various sociolinguistic backgrounds, cope with the Arabic language differently. It includes the factors influencing Arabic language acquisition and learning during their temporary stay in the Kingdom.

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### **1.1. Expatriates in KSA**

Saudi Arabia, officially known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), remains a place of attraction for foreigners to visit or stay because of several reasons. To begin with geography; constitutes the bulk of the Arabian Peninsula. It is one of the nations with both the Red Sea coast and the Persian gulf coast. Thus, the situation provides an excellent platform to far foreigners to deal with business. Subsequently, KSA is the country with the world's second-largest oil reserve and the sixth most abundant natural gas reserve (BP statistical review of World Energy June 2012). Soon after oil was discovered, individuals started coming in the majority. Above all, Saudi Arabia is a "land of two Holy Mosques", namely Al-Masjid Al-Haram and Al-Masjid Al-Nabawi. These are the holiest places in Islam that draw Muslims all over the world to perform rituals (Saudi Arabia- New World Encyclopedia).

The 35 million population of Saudi Arabia consists of 38.4% foreigners (Saudi Arabia-Migrants and Refugees Section 2020) and is mainly represented by the top three countries: India, Pakistan, and Egypt (World Population Statistics: Saudi Arabia 2022). Besides these, there are foreigners from non-Arabic-speaking countries such as the Philippines, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Europe, North America, and so on. (Table 1.2)

### **1.2. Language of KSA**

The language of the land is predominantly Arabic. The Arabic language belongs to the Semitic language family, and it comprises 30 different varieties constituting different parts of the world (majorly in North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Middle East). Arabic is the fifth most widely spoken language in the world consisting of 313 million speakers. [www.babbel.com](http://www.babbel.com) However, article 50 of the Education Policy of the Kingdom states, "students should learn at least one foreign language so that they may interact with people of other cultures" (Dr. Khalid 2012). Since the 1990's National Standard Organization has started paying distinctive attention to standardizing education in schools and universities. Still, this movement of regulating education remained on hold in KSA till 2003 owing to the thought of endangerment of Saudi society and Islamic values [1]. However, in consequence of the "threat to U.S. national security interests, there were soon calls to cut back on the amount of religion being taught in schools, colleges, and universities and to begin introducing 'broader, more secular based curriculum' in the Muslim world" (Washington Times 2003).

The functional role of English started increasing gradually and now it is making its place as the second link language of the country even though Arabic is the first. The choice of codes depends more on the sociolinguistic identity of the participants rather than the domain of use.

### 1.3. Policies for Expatriates in KSA

By following mission 2030, based on Saudization or Nitaqat, a sharp decline in no. of expatriates has been noticed as reported by the General Authority of Statistics (www.globalmediainsight.com). The policies keep on changing with time in the national interest though, the present policies made for the native here have somehow affected the economic conditions of foreigners living and working in the kingdom. Even though, in the future, there are possibilities of job openings for expatriates in order to implement development programs [2].

**Table 1.1** Demography of Saudi Arabia (Census, April 2021)

Total	Population	% Age
Saudi Nationals	21,510,000	61.45 %
Non-Nationals	13,490,000	38.54 %
Saudi Arabia	35,000,000	100.00 %

\*Here the no. of non-national includes all expatriates.

**Table 1.2** Estimated population of non-native speakers of Arabic in Saudi Arabia (Population Statistics, GMI- 2021)

S.No	Nationality	Population (Approximate)	% age
1.	India	2,550,000	7.28%
2.	Pakistan	2,450,000	7%
3.	Philippines	1,600,000	4.57%
4.	Bangladesh	1,300,000	3.71%
5.	Indonesia	1,000,000	2.85%
6.	Myanmar	500,000	1.42%
7.	Sri Lanka	350,000	1%
8.	Nepal	315,000	0.9%
9.	Turkey	200,000	0.57%
10.	Westerns	120,000	0.34%
	Total	10,385,000	29.67%

\*The statistic does not include the no. of Arab expatriates here

## **2 Literature Review.**

During their short or quasi-short visit to KSA from a different origin, nationality, linguistic, religious, professional, etc., the Expats use Arabic even without having any Arabic language base. Irrespective of all these linguistic and sociolinguistic variations, Arabic plays a very significant role in bridging the communication gap between native to non-native or even among non-natives of different linguistic origins.

Like other monolingual countries, Saudi Arabia is not an exception being influenced by the global language, English. Besides, the increasing interest in the English language among the native speakers of the land and the need to communicate with the people linguistically different, the government is playing a very important role in the implementation of the English Language for the development of the country in different aspects [1]. So far, the effect of English is less, Arabic is and will be the first Lingua Franca. And the foreigners coming to the land will keep on acquiring and learning Arabic. As Arabic is One of the major languages of the world, it has a rich cultural heritage, [3] which is reflected by the attitude of the speakers towards their mother tongue. Arabic enjoys all its prestige by being a liturgical language. The foreigners show a spiritual enthusiasm for learning Arabic as a foreign rather than a liturgical language, [4]. How far does Arabic survive among those expatriates who are no longer part of the same community? Attitude matters a lot whether one has acquired it as a driving force of only medium of communicating or learning followed by acquisition for some other reason/s, [5].

The expatriates in KSA show a different level of competence in the Arabic language “ranging from command of a few lexical items, formulaic expressions such as greetings and rudimentary conversational skills to excellent command of the grammar and vocabulary and specialized register and styles” (Wardhaugh 2010, P. 93). This level of competence depends on the period of their stay in the Kingdom and the nature of employment in the workplace. Subject to that, a lower to a high level of proficiency is acquired.

### **A. Objectives**

- To know which language is mainly used in communication
- In which domain Arabic is mainly preferred to communicate by/to foreigners?
- What makes foreigners acquire the Arabic language with different levels of proficiency
- What makes the proficiency of acquisition level different from one foreigner to another in the same occupation?
- How this acquisition leads to learning the language.

### 3. Research and Methodology

The data for this paper have been collected in the kingdom only from those expatriates for whom Arabic is a foreign language. The informants are mainly taken from the cities like Makkah, Jeddah, and Al-Khobar. Based on observation 50 questionnaires (25 Males + 25 Females) are surveyed. Each quiz consists of 25 different questions based on four skills of language (speaking, comprehension, reading, and writing), ten questions on language use, and a few basic questions that entail the linguistic and sociolinguistic background of the respondents. The level of Arabic language proficiency has been studied about three different sociolinguistic variables.

#### a. Occupation

(Male); I- Professionals II- Skilled

(Female); I- Housewives II- Working women

#### b. Religion

III- Muslims IV- Non-Muslims

#### c. Mother tongue

V- Urdu VI- Other than Urdu

The level of proficiency has been analyzed as under-speaking, comprehension, reading, and writing.

#### Speaking:

1. Low level of speaking skills; can talk in the Arabic language up to the level of greeting and expressions.
2. Medium to a higher level of proficiency in speaking; can speak Arabic sentences up to the level of full competence.

#### Comprehension:

1. A lower level of comprehensibility; understanding the Arabic language up to the level of greetings and expressions.
2. Medium to a higher level of comprehensibility; can understand Arabic sentences up to the level of full competence.

#### Reading:

1. Those, who can't read Arabic at all.
2. Low level of proficiency in reading; can read only Quranic verses without, partial or complete understanding.
3. Medium to a higher level of proficiency in reading; can read anything written in Arabic with partial or complete understanding.

#### Writing:

1. Those, who can't write Arabic at all.

2. Low level of proficiency in writing; can just write letters, proper names up to phrases, and few expressions.
3. Medium to a higher level of proficiency in writing; can write sentences to full competency in the Arabic language.

#### 4. Analysis and Findings

##### 4.1. The Result (Descriptive Statistics)

**Table 1.3-** Percentage-wise distribution of Arabic language proficiency among male expatriates in KSA.

Sociolinguistic Variables		Level of Proficiency									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Occupation	I	33.3 3	66. 66	70	30	26. 66	66. 66	53. 33	26. 66	46. 66	26. 66
	II	20	80	30	70	80	10	10	90	10	00
Religion	III	30	70	60	40	10	90	70	10	60	30
	IV	33.3 3	66. 66	53. 33	46. 66	100	00	00	100	00	00
Mother Tongue	V	12.5 5	87. 5	45. 32	54. 68	12. 5	87. 5	54. 68	12. 5	54. 68	25
	VI	35.2 9	64. 70	70. 58	41. 17	70. 58	17. 64	11. 76	88. 23	5.8 8	5.8 8

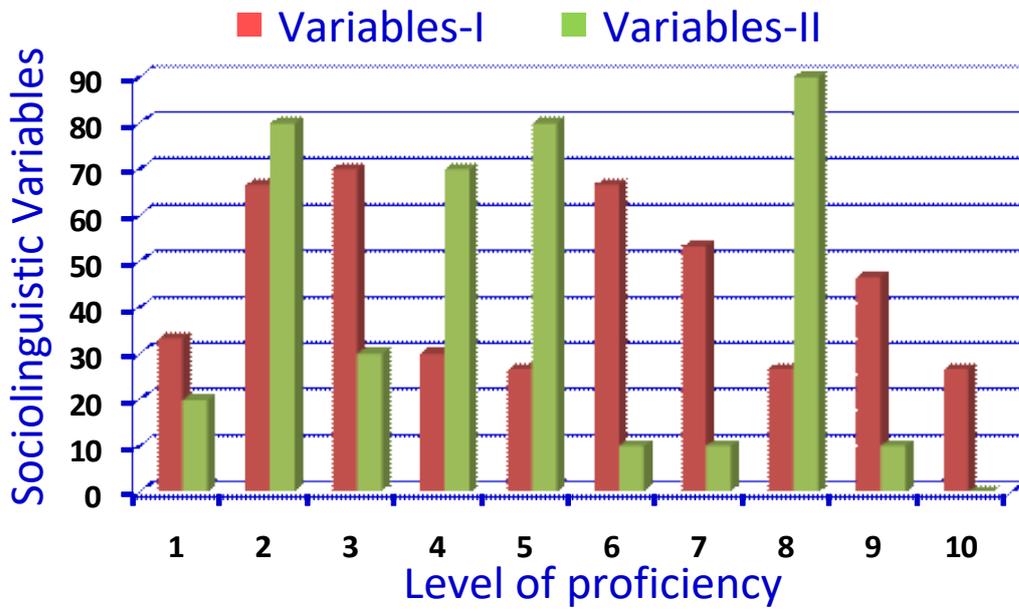


Fig. 1.3 (a) Showing male respondents (occupation)

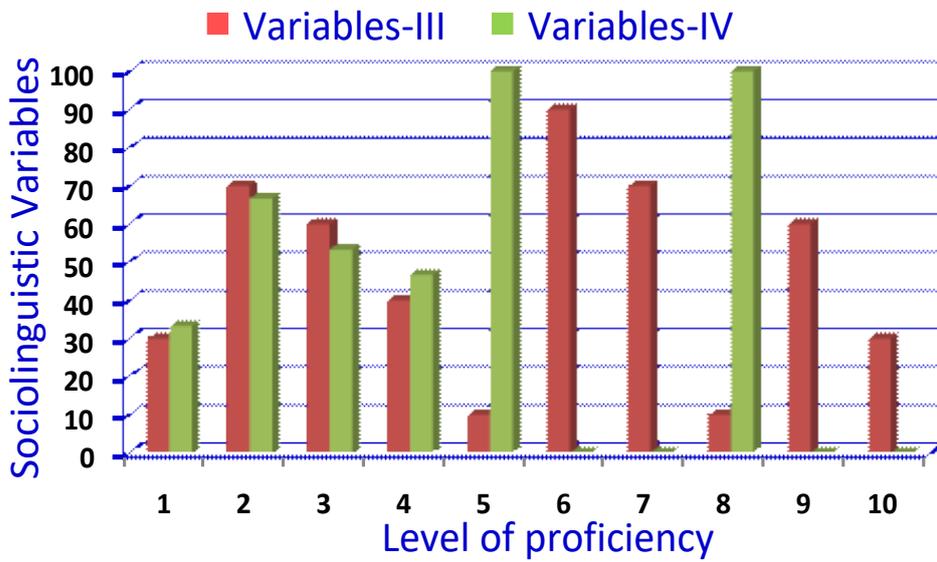


Fig. 1.3(b) Showing male respondents (religion).

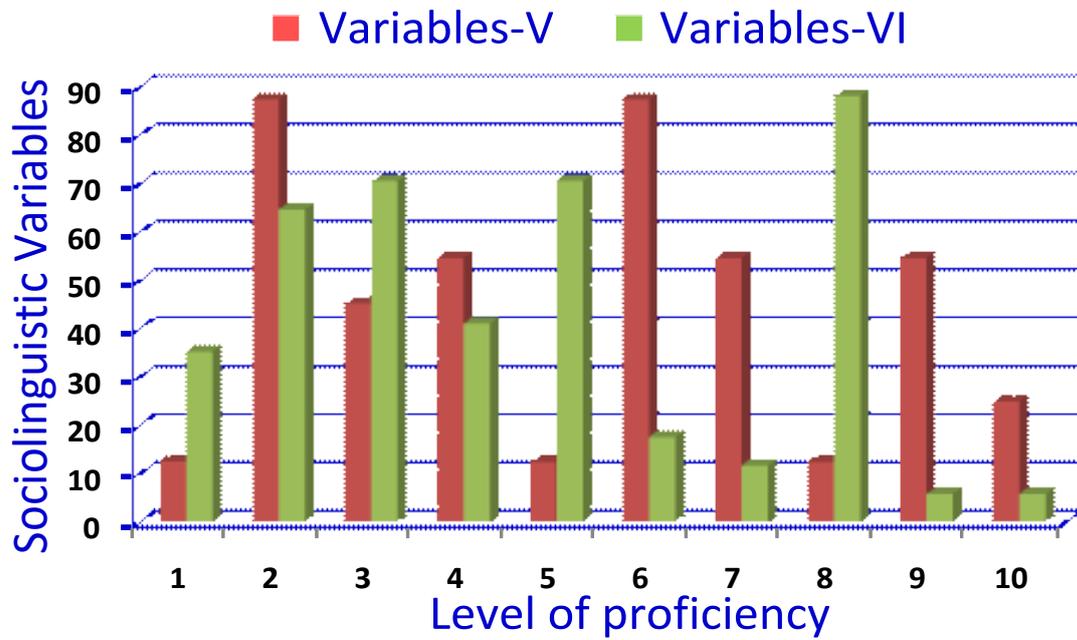


Fig. 1.3 (c) Showing male respondents (mother tongue)

Table 1.4 -Percentage-wise distribution of Arabic language proficiency among female expatriates in KSA

Sociolinguistic Variables		Level of Proficiency									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Occupation	I	62.5	37.5	75	25	37.5	62.5	62.5	75	25	25
	II	33.3	66.6	66.6	33.3	58.3	50	16.6	50	50	00
Religion	III	26.6	73.3	66.6	33.3	20	80	60	26.6	60	6.6
	IV	80	20	80	20	100	00	00	100	00	00
Mother Tongue	V	21.4	71.4	57.1	42.5	14.2	71.4	71.4	21.4	50	42.8
	VI	45.4	45.4	72.7	18.1	54.5	27.2	18.1	63.6	27.2	00

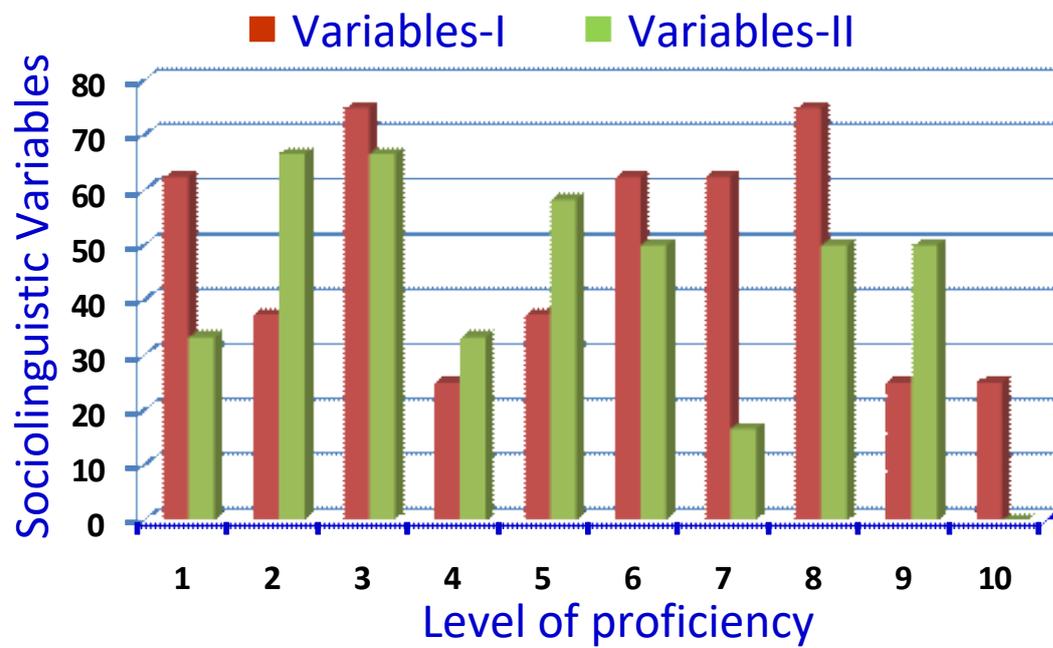


Fig. 1.4(a) Showing female respondents (occupation)

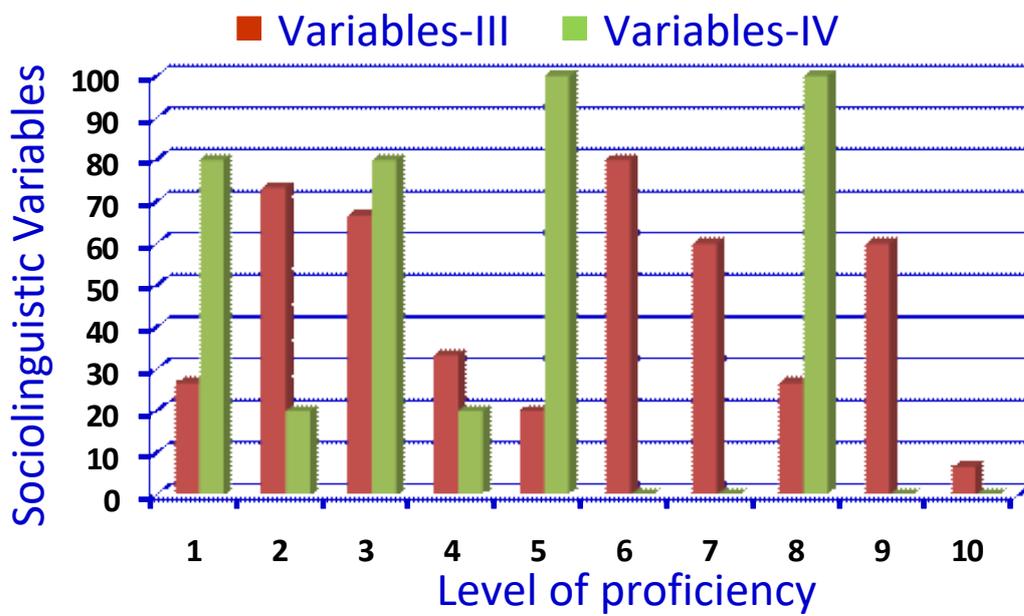


Fig. 1.4(b) showing female respondents (religion)

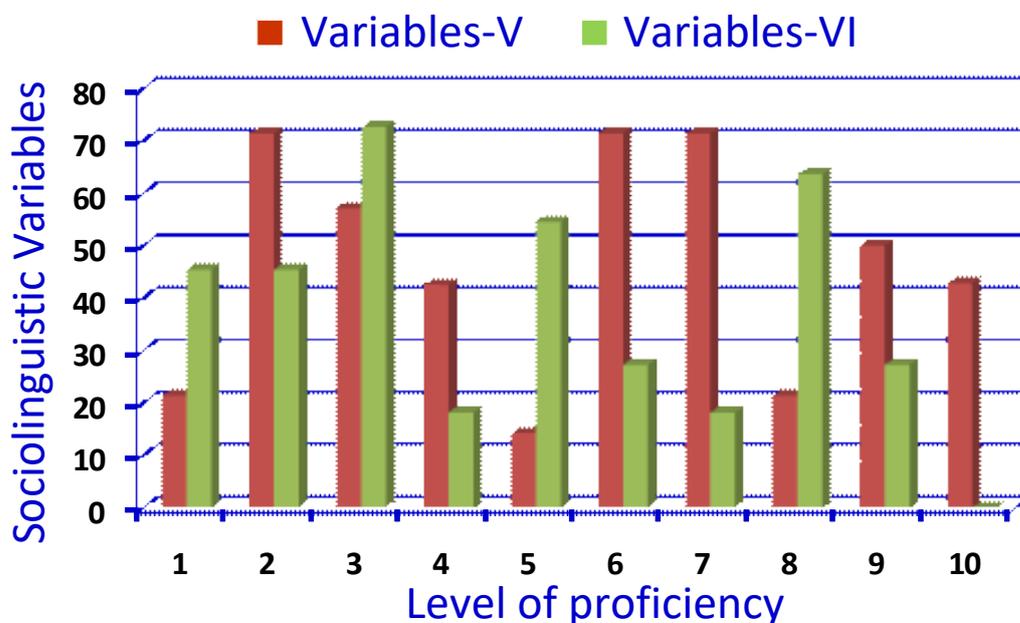


Fig. 1.4(c) showing female respondents (mother tongue)

#### 4.2. Inferential Statistic

24 out of 25 male respondents acquired Arabic at different levels of proficiency in the local environment only after they arrived in KSA. Furthermore, one already knew Arabic before coming to KSA. Three of them have learned the Arabic language to upgrade their ability, just for the sake of linguistic interest as Arabic is a liturgical language.

As table 1.3 shows that the male expatriates employed as skilled workers such as laborers, helpers, technicians, cleaners, drivers, etc. have a higher level of proficiency in oral communication. On the contrary, 80% of them cannot read and 90% of the same cannot write Arabic. As opposed to the employees working at higher levels; engineers, managers, architects, designers, doctors, etc. are less proficient in oral communication but have shown 60% of literacy.

Interpreting table 1.4 apparently, housewives are less proficient in oral skills as compared to working-class women. Based on further analysis, it has been found that working-class women can be studied under two different sections according to their working environment. Female staff working in the public domain such as hospitals as a nurse or medical practitioners have shown a higher level of proficiency in oral communication because they are required to communicate with their clients/ patients. But their reading and writing skills are highly marked by two different factors: one linguistic and another sociolinguistic i.e., using Urdu as a mother tongue and being Muslim by religion. Female respondents lying under this category (Muslim Urdu speakers) show a higher level of proficiency in reading and writing as compared to the other religious and linguistic backgrounds of participants. In terms of female university professors, and teachers in international schools, the case is a little different in comparison with

female medical practitioners. Because the mode of instruction in universities, colleges, and international schools is English so their Arabic fluency remains maximum at a basic level. As opposed to that in hospitals, medical centers, and clinics, there are no such regulations. As compared to the teaching staff, the medical staff are found more efficient in speaking and writing Arabic. Here the medical staffs need to be more expressive in a language comprehended by the majority. The women working at a lower level of jobs such as cleaners, or housekeepers under certain agencies at some institutions, colleges, hospitals, or universities have shown a higher level of competence in oral communication. But they don't know reading and writing at all, regardless of being Muslims or using Urdu as a mother tongue.

Females working for the same job in private houses of non-Arab expatriates have shown lower-level proficiency in oral communication with zero competence in reading and writing skills. Apparently, on the other hand, females working at the same job in private houses of natives or Arab expatriates have a higher level of competence in oral communication although reading and writing remain a matter of personal interest as well as the interest of their employer too.

The same may be the case among male expatriates, but this cannot be said for sure because the data has not been collected directly among male respondents by the investigator by respecting ethnic values. In other words, we can say that the matched-guise technique could not be implemented very well on male respondents.

Though Arabic places 5<sup>th</sup> position being spoken as a mother tongue with 293 million speakers living in different countries all over the world, it is used as a liturgical language by 1 billion Muslims (National encyclopedia 2010) of various languages and origins in countries across the globe. According to table 1.3, we infer, that religions do not play an important role in oral communicative skills as compared to occupations however reading and writing are highly marked by religion. None other than Muslim respondents both male and female can read or write Arabic. There is absolute illiteracy in Arabic among non-Muslim expatriates.

Unpredictably according to table 1.4 only 60% of female Muslim respondents can read Quran with or without, partial or complete understanding while 90% of male respondents have shown their proficiency in the same. The other 40% female and 10% male Muslims recite Quranic verses orally as they have learned these by listening to practice 'salah' five times prayer, obligatory to each Muslim adult.

The very strong reason behind taking Urdu as one of the sociolinguistic variables is not just because it is my mother tongue but also because it occupies the first position for being used by many non-Arab expatriates as table 1.2 infers. The third reason is the linguistic affinity of Urdu with the Arabic language and script helps the Urdu speakers to show a higher level of proficiency in reading, speaking, writing, and understanding respectively. Table 1.3 entails 87.5% of Urdu male expatriates have the highest level of Arabic speaking skills. But what about another part of 12.5% of males under the category (being Muslim and Speaking Urdu as their

first language)? It is expected that this part of the population is mainly their occupation (I-professionals), and then their attitude toward the Arabic language.

The Muslim housewives' responses entail that their proficiency in Arabic is more than they were estimated. This distinction is because of teaching or guiding their children in studying Arabic as a compulsory language (taught in the school curriculum). They help their children do assignments, homework, and projects at home. Again, the mothers with Urdu as a mother tongue background take the benefit of guiding their children in a better and more efficient way in comparison to others. Here the effect is bi-directional; both the mothers and children are being benefitted. As opposed to this, non-Muslim housewives are deprived of this opportunity even if their children are studying Arabic as a compulsory language in school. These children fully depend on school staff, neighbors, friends, or friends' families. Furthermore, the Muslim housewives join 'Tajwid' (Arabic pronunciation), Quira (Arabic recitation), and so on classes to improve their skills of reading the Quran perfectly which also enhances their skill in using the Arabic language. These all depend on their choice, motivation, and love for Arabic as a liturgical rather than a foreign language.

#### **4.3. Discussion**

The work is still open for extensive study. The data could include the informants from different cities of the Kingdom. As the present study just includes informants from the city of Jeddah, Makkah, and Khobar because of respect for certain cultural norms implemented for female travelers without any occupant 'mahram'.

The matched-guise technique (Lambert et al.1960) is followed during the questionnaire session. But it could not be managed with every single respondent because of gender differences between the investigator and informant. By following those socio-cultural rules, the investigator has tried to achieve all those adjectives set at the beginning.

Do all the efforts and expenses made by the expatriates as well as the institution or organization in acquiring and learning Arabic as a foreign language live longer? What are the plans of learners in learning this language? These are the questions that could be sorted in future studies.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In the beam of this study, we can infer that foreigners coming from different origins even for a short period acquire or learn the Arabic language at a different level of competence according to their needs. The level of proficiency in Arabic is even increased for a better understanding of the religion of Islam. In consideration of obtained statistics, it is proposed that appropriate procedures can be prepared to promote the Arabic language among the expatriates up to the level of full competence. The institution, companies, and hiring agencies could offer language orientation programs to newcomers. Implementing such programs will not only ease the

prevailing working environment but also propagate the Arabic language as a worldwide language which is one of the recognized languages of the United Nation.

The implementation of vision 2030 has brought many social and economic transformations to the Kingdom. Hopefully, the linguistic aspect will also be covered hence the prestigious language of the land flourish and will spread worldwide.

It is suggestive to conduct IALTS (International Arabic Language Testing System) or TOFAL (Test for Arabic as a Foreign Language) for those who are visiting the country for the purpose of taking employment or doing Business.

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