



Do Language Textbooks Challenge or Reinforce Cultural Stereotypes? Perspectives of Advanced Learners of Arabic

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Abstract

Language textbooks do more than facilitate linguistic development; they also mediate learners' encounters with the cultural communities represented through the target language. This role becomes particularly significant in advanced foreign-language education, where learners are expected to engage critically with complex social, political, and cultural representations. This qualitative study examines how advanced learners of Arabic perceived and negotiated cultural representations in *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya*, Part Three, with particular attention to whether the textbook challenged or reinforced pre-existing stereotypes about Arab cultures. The study draws on focus-group data collected from eight advanced American learners of Arabic specializing in diplomacy and politics at a language center in Rabat, Morocco. Participants had extensive experience using the textbook during their advanced Arabic studies. The focus-group discussion was audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and subjected to iterative qualitative content analysis. Findings indicate a complex relationship between textbook representation and learner perception. Participants acknowledged the textbook's contribution to introducing cultural, historical, and political issues related to the Arab world, yet they also perceived some representations as insufficiently diverse or critically contextualized. Rather than consistently disrupting pre-existing assumptions, certain representations were perceived as potentially confirming simplified understandings of Arab societies. Learners particularly emphasized the need for greater regional diversity, authentic voices, contemporary perspectives, sustained self-reflection, and opportunities for direct intercultural engagement. The findings suggest that cultural representation in advanced language textbooks should move beyond exposure to cultural information toward pedagogical practices that actively encourage learners to interrogate, reassess, and complicate their prior assumptions. The study contributes to discussions of textbook evaluation, intercultural learning, and cultural representation in Arabic-as-a-foreign-language education.

1. Introduction

Language textbooks occupy a central position in foreign language education, functioning not only as resources for developing linguistic competence but also as important sites of cultural representation. Through their selection of texts, images, characters, social practices, historical events, and perspectives, textbooks provide learners with representations of the communities associated with the target language. This cultural function is especially significant when learners have limited direct contact with target-language communities and therefore rely heavily on instructional materials as sources of cultural knowledge (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999;

Risager, 2018; Xiong et al., 2021). Textbooks should consequently be understood not as culturally neutral repositories of linguistic knowledge but as mediated representations of culture, society, and the wider world (Risager, 2018).

The relationship between language and culture makes cultural representation an important dimension of foreign language education. Learning a language involves more than acquiring grammatical structures and vocabulary; it also requires learners to engage with culturally situated meanings, practices, perspectives, and identities. From an intercultural perspective, successful language learning therefore involves developing the ability to interpret cultural meanings, relate different perspectives, interact across cultural boundaries, and critically examine both unfamiliar cultural practices and one's own assumptions (Byram, 1997). Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence is particularly relevant in this respect because it distinguishes cultural knowledge from broader capacities involving attitudes, interpretation, interaction, and critical cultural awareness.

The cultural content selected for textbooks can consequently influence the kinds of intercultural encounters available to learners. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) conceptualize textbooks as "cultural mirrors," emphasizing the ways in which teaching materials reflect and mediate cultural meanings in the language classroom. Their work also highlights the importance of adopting a reflective approach to cultural content rather than treating textbook representations as transparent descriptions of cultural reality. Similarly, Risager (2018) argues that language textbooks participate in representations of culture, society, and the world and proposes examining them through national, cultural, postcolonial, and transnational perspectives.

This representational function creates both pedagogical opportunities and potential limitations. Textbooks can expose learners to unfamiliar perspectives, introduce cultural diversity, and stimulate reflection on cultural difference. At the same time, cultural communities may be simplified when instructional materials privilege particular places, practices, identities, or narratives while giving limited attention to internal diversity. A recent scoping review of 62 peer-reviewed studies published between 2012 and 2022 found that research on cultural representation in foreign-language textbooks has expanded considerably while problems involving cultural omission, misrepresentation, and implicit representation remain significant concerns (Zhang et al., 2024). Cultural inclusion alone, therefore, does not necessarily guarantee balanced or sufficiently complex cultural representation.

The issue becomes particularly consequential when textbook representations interact with stereotypes that learners have developed before entering the language classroom. Learners do not encounter cultural material from a neutral position. Their interpretations may already have been shaped by prior education, personal experiences, public discourse, and media representations. From the perspective of intercultural communicative competence, the pedagogical objective should therefore extend beyond exposing learners to information about another culture toward enabling them to interpret, compare, question, and critically evaluate cultural perspectives (Byram, 1997). This distinction is central to the present study because encountering cultural information does not necessarily imply reconsidering the assumptions through which that information is interpreted.

McConachy (2018) provides an important perspective on this relationship by demonstrating that even potentially problematic textbook representations can become resources for intercultural learning when learners are encouraged to engage with them critically. Rather than treating students as passive recipients of textbook discourse, his research emphasizes their capacity to interpret, question, and construct critical accounts of cultural representations. This suggests that the pedagogical consequences of textbook representation depend not only on what materials contain but also on how learners interact with and interpret that content.

These questions assume particular significance in Arabic-as-a-foreign-language (AFL) education. Arabic is associated with culturally, geographically, linguistically, politically, and socially diverse communities extending across numerous national and regional contexts.

Representing this diversity within a language textbook is inherently challenging. A textbook may provide learners with accessible cultural reference points while simultaneously risking the construction of “Arab culture” as a more homogeneous category than the realities of Arabic-speaking societies warrant.

Research involving *Al-Kitaab* illustrates this representational challenge. Uzum et al. (2021), in a comparative analysis of collegiate Arabic, French, and German textbooks, found that nation-state ideologies and tourism-oriented discourses were prominent across the materials examined. Their analysis showed that target-language communities could be represented in homogeneous and essentialized ways, potentially obscuring the fluidity and complexity of cultural identities. Because the study included *Al-Kitaab*, its findings are particularly relevant to examining how widely used Arabic instructional materials construct the communities learners encounter through language study.

Recent AFL-specific research further strengthens this concern. Fahmi (2026), examining five volumes from the widely used *Al-Kitaab* and *Arabiyyat al-Naas* series, identified a substantial predominance of surface or objective cultural dimensions over deeper cultural practices and perspectives. The study found greater representation of cultural places and communities, persons, and products than of practices and perspectives and argues that prioritizing generalized cultural elements may contribute to the homogenization of target cultures when localized complexity receives insufficient attention. These findings suggest that the presence of substantial cultural content does not necessarily guarantee equally substantial engagement with cultural diversity and deeper perspectives.

Evidence from other foreign-language contexts points to a similar distinction between cultural inclusion and intercultural development. Astaifi and El Kirat El Allame (2024), examining cultural representation in Moroccan EFL textbooks, identified uneven patterns in the integration of cultural content and raised questions about the capacity of such materials to support intercultural awareness. Although their study concerns English rather than Arabic language education, it reinforces the broader argument that the quantity of cultural material and its capacity to facilitate intercultural understanding should not be treated as equivalent.

An important limitation of much textbook research, however, is that identifying representational patterns in instructional materials does not necessarily reveal how learners interpret those patterns. Textbook analysis can determine which cultural communities, identities, practices, and perspectives are present, marginalized, or absent, but it cannot independently establish how learners respond to them. Learners may accept particular representations, question them, interpret them through previous experiences, or compare them with assumptions they already hold. McConachy (2018) therefore emphasizes the importance of examining learners’ critical engagement with textbook cultural representations, while recent research has similarly called for greater attention to interaction and interpretation in studies of textbook culture (Zhang et al., 2024).

This distinction is particularly relevant to *Al-Kitaab*. Existing scholarship has provided valuable evidence about the cultural and ideological organization of the series (Fahmi, 2026; Xiong et al., 2021), but comparatively less attention has been directed toward how advanced learners themselves interpret these cultural representations after sustained engagement with the textbook. The present study addresses this gap by foregrounding learners’ perspectives and examining how textbook content interacts with cultural assumptions they bring to the learning environment.

The study draws on qualitative focus-group data from eight advanced American learners of Arabic specializing in diplomacy and politics at a language center in Rabat, Morocco. Participants were approaching the end of their academic year and had used *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya, Part Three* extensively during their advanced Arabic studies. Analysis of their accounts revealed an important tension: participants acknowledged the textbook’s contribution to introducing them to Arab cultures while simultaneously questioning whether

some representations provided sufficient diversity and critical depth to disrupt pre-existing assumptions.

Rather than approaching this tension through a binary evaluation of whether *Al-Kitaab* is stereotypical or non-stereotypical, the present study examines the interaction between textbook representation and learner interpretation. It therefore addresses the following research questions:

How do advanced learners of Arabic perceive cultural representations in *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya*, Part Three?

To what extent do learners perceive these representations as challenging, reinforcing, or complicating their pre-existing stereotypes about Arab cultures?

By foregrounding learner perspectives, the study contributes to research on AFL pedagogy, cultural representation, intercultural learning, and textbook evaluation. More specifically, it shifts attention from asking only **what textbooks represent** toward examining **how learners receive and negotiate those representations**. In doing so, the study approaches cultural learning as an interpretive process in which textbook content interacts with learners' prior assumptions, experiences, and cultural frames.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Textbooks as Cultural Mediators

Language textbooks perform functions that extend beyond the systematic presentation of vocabulary, grammar, and communicative structures. They also operate as cultural and curricular artefacts through which learners encounter representations of societies associated with the target language. The people, places, practices, historical events, social relationships, and perspectives selected for inclusion contribute to constructing particular images of the communities being studied. For this reason, textbook analysis has increasingly moved beyond linguistic content to examine how educational materials represent culture, society, identity, and the wider world (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Risager, 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). Risager (2018) conceptualizes language textbooks as important sites for representations of the world and emphasizes the need to examine the geographical, cultural, political, and ideological perspectives embedded in instructional materials.

The cultural dimension of textbooks is especially important because language learning cannot be separated entirely from the social and cultural contexts in which meanings are produced. Cultural content may appear through explicit information about traditions, history, institutions, and everyday practices, but it may also be communicated implicitly through narratives, images, characters, geographical choices, social roles, and assumptions about what constitutes ordinary or representative experience. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) describe textbooks as “cultural mirrors,” emphasizing that teaching materials can reflect particular cultural perspectives while simultaneously shaping learners' encounters with unfamiliar communities. Their framework also distinguishes among materials oriented toward learners' source culture, target cultures, and international cultures, demonstrating that the cultural orientation of a textbook influences the kinds of intercultural encounters available to learners.

Understanding textbooks as cultural mediators also requires recognizing that representation is necessarily selective. No single instructional resource can represent the complete linguistic, regional, social, religious, political, and ideological diversity associated with a language. Selection itself, however, has consequences. Decisions concerning which countries, communities, historical experiences, social groups, and cultural practices are foregrounded—and which are absent or marginalized—shape the cultural world presented to learners. Risager (2018) therefore argues for examining textbook representations through multiple perspectives, including national, cultural, postcolonial, and transnational approaches. Such an analytical orientation makes it possible to consider not only what textbooks contain but also how their selections construct relationships among language, culture, society, and the world.

Recent empirical scholarship confirms that these questions remain relevant in contemporary foreign-language education. Zhang et al. (2024), in a scoping review of 62 peer-reviewed studies published between 2012 and 2022, found that research on cultural representation in foreign-language textbooks has expanded considerably in theoretical orientation and methodology. Nevertheless, their synthesis showed that some cultures continue to be overlooked or misrepresented and that cultural meanings are frequently conveyed implicitly rather than explicitly. The authors consequently identify interdisciplinarity, intersectionality, interaction, and intersubjectivity as important directions for future research on textbook representation.

This concern is particularly significant when textbooks present culturally diverse language communities. Cultural representation can become problematic when complexity is reduced to a limited number of recognizable symbols, practices, personalities, or national narratives. Such representations may provide learners with accessible introductory knowledge, but they can simultaneously obscure differences within communities. The problem is therefore not simply whether culture is included in a textbook, but what kinds of culture are made visible, whose perspectives are represented, and whether learners are given opportunities to encounter internal diversity and competing interpretations. Risager's (2021) work demonstrates the importance of examining these representational choices because language textbooks participate in broader constructions of geography, history, identity, and social relationships rather than merely transmitting neutral cultural information.

This distinction between the **presence of cultural content** and the **quality of cultural representation** is particularly relevant to Arabic-as-a-foreign-language education. Recent analysis of widely used AFL textbook series demonstrates that the inclusion of substantial cultural material does not necessarily guarantee balanced representation. Fahmi (2026), examining five volumes from *Al-Kitaab* and *Arabiyyat al-Naas*, found a predominance of surface or objective cultural dimensions and comparatively limited attention to deeper cultural practices and perspectives. The study argues that cultural representation in language curricula is embedded within broader ideological, sociopolitical, and economic contexts and warns that prioritizing generalized cultural elements can contribute to the homogenization of target cultures at the expense of localized complexity.

The representational function of textbooks therefore has pedagogical consequences. Learners do not encounter culture as an exhaustive or transparent reality; they encounter a selected and pedagogically organized representation of it. The cultural meanings available through a textbook are shaped by choices concerning inclusion, omission, emphasis, sequencing, and contextualization. As Zhang et al. (2024) demonstrate, contemporary textbook scholarship has consequently expanded beyond identifying cultural elements toward investigating questions of representation, interaction, and interpretation.

For the present study, this understanding of textbooks as cultural mediators provides an important conceptual starting point. *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya, Part Three* is approached not simply as a repository of linguistic and cultural information, but as one mediated representation of culturally diverse Arabic-speaking societies. The central issue is therefore not whether the textbook contains cultural content, but how learners interpret that content and how its representations interact with assumptions they already hold. This learner-reception dimension is particularly important because the cultural significance of textbook material cannot be determined solely through content analysis. It also depends on how learners interpret, negotiate, accept, resist, or complicate the representations they encounter.

2.2 Cultural Stereotypes and Learner Interpretation

The representation of culture in foreign-language textbooks becomes particularly consequential when complex communities are reduced to generalized, homogeneous, or static images. Cultural stereotypes may offer learners simplified interpretive categories for understanding unfamiliar communities, but such simplification can become problematic when

particular characteristics are presented as representative of an entire cultural group. Recent research continues to identify this problem in language-learning materials. Zhang et al. (2024), in their review of 62 studies on cultural representation in foreign-language textbooks, found that biased and misleading cultural representations remain present despite increasing scholarly attention to diversity and interculturality. More recently, Taqdir (2025), in a systematic review of 24 studies focusing on visual representation in foreign-language textbooks, found recurring cultural and gender stereotypes and emphasized the need for more inclusive, dynamic, and balanced representations.

The pedagogical significance of stereotypes becomes clearer when cultural learning is understood as more than the acquisition of information about another society. From an intercultural perspective, language education should help learners develop the capacity to interpret cultural meanings, relate different perspectives, interact across cultural boundaries, and critically evaluate both unfamiliar cultures and their own assumptions. Byram's (1997) influential model of intercultural communicative competence conceptualizes this development in terms of attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Within this framework, successful intercultural learning involves openness to other perspectives and the ability to reflect critically on cultural meanings rather than simply accumulating information about a target culture. The continued importance of this perspective is reflected in later pedagogical work by Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002), which positions the intercultural dimension as an integral component of language teaching.

This distinction is particularly important for understanding how stereotypes may operate in textbook-mediated learning. Providing learners with information about a target culture does not necessarily lead them to reconsider assumptions they already hold. Cultural knowledge and critical cultural awareness should not be treated as interchangeable outcomes. Recent empirical work examining the components of intercultural competence supports this distinction: cultural knowledge alone does not automatically translate into critical cultural awareness, whereas attitudes and intercultural skills play important roles in its development. Consequently, a textbook may contain substantial cultural information while offering relatively limited opportunities for learners to interrogate how that information relates to their existing beliefs.

Learners should therefore be understood as active interpreters rather than passive recipients of textbook discourse. They approach cultural representations through prior experiences, beliefs, expectations, and culturally situated frames of reference. The meanings produced through textbook engagement consequently emerge from an interaction between what the material represents and how learners interpret that representation. This is especially significant when learners have limited direct contact with members of the target-language communities and textbooks constitute one of their principal sources of cultural exposure. Uzum et al. (2021), in their comparative analysis of Arabic, French, and German collegiate textbooks, emphasize precisely this representational role, noting that textbooks can substantially influence learners' understandings of target-language communities when opportunities for direct interaction are limited. Their analysis also found that nation-state ideologies and tourism-oriented discourse could contribute to homogeneous and essentialized representations of language communities while obscuring complex and fluid identities.

The possibility that textbook representations may reinforce existing cultural frames does not mean, however, that problematic materials must necessarily be removed from instruction. McConachy (2018) offers a particularly relevant alternative perspective by demonstrating how imperfect cultural representations can themselves become resources for intercultural learning. Drawing on classroom data from learners of English in Japan, he argues that students can actively interpret and critically reflect on cultural representations when pedagogical activities encourage them to examine the assumptions embedded in textbook content. The educational question therefore shifts from simply determining whether a textbook contains problematic representations to examining what learners are encouraged to **do with those representations**.

From this perspective, a stereotypical or simplified representation can potentially produce different learning outcomes depending on its pedagogical treatment. If it is presented without contextualization or opportunities for questioning, learners may interpret it through existing assumptions and thereby leave those assumptions unchallenged. Conversely, when learners are encouraged to compare representations, identify omissions, consider alternative perspectives, and examine their own interpretive positions, the same material may become a stimulus for critical intercultural reflection. McConachy's (2018) findings demonstrate that learners can construct critical accounts of textbook cultural content and suggest that the pedagogical mediation of representation is central to the development of intercultural competence.

This argument is consistent with Byram's conceptualization of **critical cultural awareness**, which places particular importance on learners' ability to evaluate cultural perspectives and practices rather than merely recognize cultural difference. Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) similarly emphasize that intercultural language teaching should encourage learners to examine both other cultural perspectives and their own assumptions. Such an orientation requires movement beyond a model in which culture is treated as a collection of facts toward one in which learners critically interpret cultural meanings and reflect on the positions from which they make those interpretations.

The distinction between **cultural exposure** and **intercultural engagement** is therefore fundamental. Exposure occurs when learners encounter information, images, narratives, or practices associated with another cultural context. Intercultural engagement requires a more active process in which those representations are interpreted, compared, questioned, and related to learners' existing perspectives. Increasing the quantity of cultural information in a textbook does not necessarily produce this deeper engagement. What matters is also the diversity and complexity of the representations provided, and the opportunities learners receive to critically negotiate their meanings.

Recent research reinforces the importance of this distinction. Zhang et al. (2024) identify interaction and intersubjectivity among important future directions for cultural-representation research, signaling a need to move beyond analyses of what textbooks contain toward greater attention to how representations operate through interaction and interpretation. Similarly, Taqdir's (2025) systematic review concludes that textbook research would benefit from greater investigation of teachers' and students' perceptions, internal cultural diversity, and the ways stereotypical representations are experienced within actual learning contexts.

These perspectives are particularly relevant to the present study because they shift the analytical focus from the textbook as an isolated cultural artefact to the relationship between **representation and reception**. Determining that a textbook contains simplified, selective, or potentially stereotypical representations does not establish how learners understand those representations or whether their previous assumptions are strengthened, challenged, or complicated through engagement with them. Investigating learner interpretation is therefore necessary for understanding the pedagogical consequences of cultural representation. In the context of advanced Arabic learning, this question becomes especially significant because learners are linguistically equipped to engage with increasingly complex cultural, historical, social, and political material while simultaneously bringing their own pre-existing understandings of the Arab world to that engagement.

2.3 Cultural Representation in Arabic-as-a-Foreign-Language Textbooks

The question of cultural representation acquires particular significance in Arabic-as-a-foreign-language (AFL) education because Arabic is associated with a geographically extensive and internally diverse range of communities. Arabic-speaking societies differ substantially in dialect, history, political organization, social practices, religious composition, and cultural traditions. Consequently, presenting "Arab culture" as a unified and stable entity risks obscuring the diversity that characterizes Arabic-speaking communities. This issue is especially relevant when textbooks constitute a major source through which learners encounter

the target-language communities, particularly when opportunities for sustained direct interaction with Arabic speakers are limited (Xiong et al., 2021).

Research on Arabic teaching materials has increasingly recognized textbooks as important vehicles of cultural transmission. Al-Sharabi (2021), for example, examined B1–B2 Arabic-as-a-foreign-language textbooks from the perspective of cultural transfer, emphasizing that foreign-language education involves not only the development of linguistic skills but also engagement with the cultural contexts associated with the target language. Similarly, research examining Arabic textbooks used in Turkey has treated textbooks as primary resources through which cultural elements are selected and communicated to foreign-language learners. These studies reinforce the importance of examining not simply the linguistic progression of AFL textbooks but also the cultural worlds constructed through their texts, activities, images, and topics.

Comparative research provides particularly relevant evidence regarding *Al-Kitaab*. Uzum et al. (2021) conducted a multimodal critical discourse analysis of collegiate Arabic, French, and German textbooks used at a U.S. university. Their analysis included *Al-Kitaab* and investigated how textbooks construct both target-language communities and the identities of imagined language learners. The study found that nation-state ideologies and tourism-oriented discourse were prominent across the materials and that target-language communities tended to be represented as homogeneous and essentialized. The authors further observed that complex and fluid identities were inadequately represented and that minoritized groups could be marginalized, tokenized, or absent from textbook representations (Xiong et al., 2021).

These findings are particularly important for Arabic language education because cultural representation cannot easily be organized around a single nation-state or homogeneous cultural community. Arabic is used across multiple national and regional contexts, and learners may encounter substantial differences in linguistic varieties, everyday practices, identities, political experiences, and cultural perspectives. A representation that privileges easily recognizable national symbols or generalized notions of “Arab culture” may therefore provide an accessible introduction while simultaneously minimizing the internal diversity of Arabic-speaking societies. Xiong et al.’s (2021) analysis demonstrates how textbook discourse can participate in this process by constructing target-language communities through relatively stable categories that do not necessarily capture the complexity of actual identities and cultural experiences.

Evidence from other contexts similarly suggests that Arabic-language textbooks make selective choices concerning cultural representation. Kuraedah et al. (2022), examining government-endorsed English and Arabic textbooks in Indonesia, identified representations organized around cultural dimensions such as persons, products, perspectives, and practices. Their analysis demonstrates that Arabic teaching materials communicate cultural meaning through choices concerning people, everyday activities, professions, stories, and other domains rather than functioning as culturally neutral language-learning resources. Such findings reinforce the need to examine which dimensions of culture receive sustained attention and which remain comparatively peripheral.

The most directly relevant recent evidence comes from Fahmi (2026), who examined cultural representation in two widely adopted AFL textbook series, *Al-Kitaab* and *Arabiyyat al-Naas*. Drawing on Moran’s cultural framework and a combination of deductive and inductive content analysis, Fahmi analyzed five textbook volumes and found a pronounced imbalance between surface/objective and deep/subjective dimensions of culture. Cultural places and communities, persons, and products appeared considerably more frequently than cultural practices and perspectives. Fahmi argues that this imbalance may privilege visible and readily identifiable cultural elements while providing comparatively less access to the underlying perspectives and locally situated practices through which cultural meanings are negotiated.

Fahmi's (2026) analysis is especially significant because it moves beyond simply determining whether AFL textbooks contain cultural material. The study demonstrates that *Al-Kitaab* and *Arabiyyat al-Naas* contain substantial cultural content, yet the **distribution and nature** of that content remain consequential. The prevalence of surface culture does not mean that learners receive no meaningful cultural exposure; rather, it raises questions about whether the cultural knowledge provided is sufficiently complex to illuminate variation, contested meanings, everyday practices, and different perspectives within Arabic-speaking societies. Fahmi consequently warns that cultural representation can contribute to homogenization when global similarities are prioritized at the expense of localized cultural complexity.

This concern is particularly relevant to the present study because *Al-Kitaab* explicitly positions cultural learning as part of Arabic language development. The program is designed to integrate linguistic proficiency with cultural understanding, and its advanced materials expose learners to different facets of Arab culture and society. The current *Al-Kitaab* program describes Part Three as continuing learners' progression toward advanced-high proficiency, while the publisher characterizes the advanced volume as combining language development with intercultural competence and engagement with the Arab world. Such objectives make questions about how learners interpret the cultural representations particularly important.

The existing literature nevertheless remains dominated by analyses of **textbook content and discourse**. Uzum et al. (2021) investigate how textbooks construct communities and identities through multimodal discourse, while Fahmi (2026) examines the distribution and ideological organization of cultural dimensions within AFL materials. Both approaches provide important evidence about what textbooks represent and how those representations are structured. However, neither form of analysis can independently establish how learners themselves interpret those representations, whether they recognize them as generalized or stereotypical, or whether engagement with textbook content alters assumptions learners held before encountering the material.

This distinction is particularly important when considering cultural stereotypes. A representation identified by researchers as simplified or homogeneous does not necessarily produce an identical interpretation among learners. Some learners may accept it, others may question it, and still others may interpret it through prior experiences or assumptions that reinforce meanings not explicitly stated in the textbook. Conversely, exposure to diverse or potentially stereotype-challenging material does not guarantee that learners will revise previously held beliefs. Understanding the pedagogical consequences of AFL textbook representation therefore requires attention not only to textual content but also to **learner reception**.

The present study addresses this dimension by examining how advanced learners interpret cultural representations encountered in *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya, Part Three*. Rather than conducting another content analysis of the textbook, it investigates learners' accounts of whether their engagement with the material challenged, reinforced, or complicated pre-existing understandings of Arab cultures. In doing so, the study complements existing analyses of AFL materials by shifting attention from **what the textbook represents** to **what learners make of those representations**.

2.4 From Textbook Representation to Learner Reception: The Research Gap

Taken together, existing research establishes three important points. First, foreign-language textbooks are significant sites of cultural representation, and their portrayals of target-language communities can include omissions, imbalances, and misleading representations (Zhang et al., 2024). Second, learners can engage critically with imperfect textbook representations when pedagogical conditions encourage interpretation and reflection (McConachy, 2018). Third, recent research specifically examining AFL textbooks indicates that widely used materials such as *Al-Kitaab* may privilege surface cultural content over deeper engagement with practices and perspectives (Fahmi, 2026).

What remains less well understood is how **advanced learners themselves interpret these representations after sustained exposure to the textbook**. Existing content analyses can identify what kinds of cultural representations appear in instructional materials, but they cannot determine whether learners perceive those representations as challenging or confirming assumptions they already hold. This reception-oriented question is especially important for advanced learners, whose linguistic proficiency potentially enables more sustained engagement with complex social, historical, political, and cultural material.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the perspectives of eight advanced American learners of Arabic who had extensively used *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya, Part Three*. Rather than evaluating cultural representation exclusively from the researcher's perspective, it foregrounds learners' accounts of how they interpreted the cultural material and whether they believed it challenged, reinforced, or complicated their pre-existing understandings of Arab cultures.

This focus is directly supported by the original dataset. The doctoral analysis identified **"Reinforcing Learners' Preconceived Stereotypes"** as a major focus-group theme and showed that participants perceived a tension between the textbook's attempts to encourage reflection and its capacity to facilitate deeper reconsideration of cultural assumptions. One participant, for example, valued the textbook's self-reflective component while arguing that recognizing prejudice was insufficient without activities that encouraged deeper transformation of learners' perspectives.

The study therefore extends existing AFL textbook research by connecting **cultural representation with learner reception**. In doing so, it approaches stereotypes not merely as textual properties that can be identified by researchers, but as meanings that emerge through the interaction between instructional content and learners' pre-existing cultural frames.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how advanced learners of Arabic perceived and interpreted cultural representations encountered in *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya, Part Three*. The study draws on qualitative data collected as part of a broader doctoral research project examining the pedagogical and cultural dimensions of the textbook. While the broader project investigated critical thinking, hate-speech detection, media and information literacy, and cultural representation, the present article focuses specifically on learners' perceptions of cultural representations and their accounts of whether these representations challenged, reinforced, or complicated their pre-existing understandings of Arab cultures.

A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the objective was not to quantify learners' attitudes toward the textbook but to examine how they articulated, interpreted, and negotiated their experiences with its cultural content. The original doctoral project initially considered questionnaire-based data collection but subsequently adopted a focus-group approach because the relatively specialized population of advanced Arabic learners was small and because discussion-based qualitative data were considered more appropriate for eliciting detailed perspectives.

The resulting focus-group transcripts were examined through qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis provides a systematic means of organizing and interpreting qualitative material, including interview and focus-group data, through processes such as segmentation, categorization, coding, and interpretation (Schreier, 2012). In the present study, this approach enabled close examination of the ways learners described cultural representations in *Al-Kitaab* and related these representations to assumptions they had previously held about Arab societies.

3.2 Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at a language center in Rabat, Morocco, offering intensive Arabic-language instruction to learners seeking advanced proficiency for professional purposes. The participants were **eight advanced American learners of Arabic specializing in diplomacy and politics**. They were approaching the end of their academic year and had used *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya, Part Three* extensively as part of their advanced Arabic studies. Their sustained engagement with the textbook provided substantial familiarity with the linguistic, cultural, historical, and sociopolitical material under discussion.

The participants constituted a particularly relevant group for the purposes of the present analysis. They were experienced rather than novice learners and had chosen Morocco as a context in which to develop their Arabic proficiency through intensive study. The original research describes *Al-Kitaab, Part Three* as a central resource in their advanced linguistic and cultural learning. Their specialization in diplomacy and politics was also relevant because the textbook engages with political, historical, cultural, and media-related subjects that intersected with their academic and professional interests.

The study does not attempt to treat these eight participants as representative of advanced Arabic learners generally. Instead, their accounts are examined as situated qualitative perspectives arising from sustained engagement with a particular textbook in a particular advanced-language-learning context.

3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through a **semi-structured focus-group discussion**. The semi-structured format combined predetermined areas of discussion with sufficient flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences and respond to one another's observations. The discussion addressed themes connected to participants' engagement with *Al-Kitaab*, including its cultural content and representations of Arab societies.

The use of a focus group was particularly appropriate for exploring cultural perceptions because it created a discursive setting in which participants could compare interpretations, elaborate on shared or divergent experiences, and respond to perspectives introduced by other members of the group. Rather than generating isolated individual responses, the format allowed perceptions of textbook content to be articulated and negotiated through interaction.

The discussion was **audio-recorded with participants' explicit consent**. Participants specifically preferred audio recording rather than video recording because of privacy concerns. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Participants also requested anonymity and the omission of their real names from the transcripts and resulting research outputs.

The original transcript demonstrates that participants were invited to reflect directly on *Al-Kitaab's* approach to cultural representation and media-related content. Their responses subsequently developed into broader discussions of diversity within Arab societies, cultural generalization, pre-existing assumptions, contemporary perspectives, and the need for more direct engagement with Arab voices and communities.

3.4 Data Analysis

The focus-group transcript was analyzed manually using an iterative qualitative content-analysis process. The analysis began after completion of the focus-group discussion and transcription of the audio-recorded data. Personal identifiers were removed before the material was analyzed.

The transcript was read repeatedly to facilitate close familiarization with participants' accounts. Through these successive readings, relevant segments were identified and organized into categories, which were subsequently examined for broader patterns of meaning. The dissertation describes this process as involving multiple readings through which categories were defined and themes formulated from participants' discussions. This iterative movement between individual statements, categories, and broader interpretive patterns is consistent with

qualitative content analysis, in which qualitative material is systematically organized through a coding framework while remaining attentive to meaning and context (Schreier, 2012).

For the present article, analytical attention was narrowed to portions of the dataset concerning **cultural representation, prior assumptions, stereotypes, cultural diversity, and learners' perceived need for more complex or authentic engagement with Arab cultures**. This focused analytical lens corresponds directly to the article's two research questions and distinguishes the present analysis from the broader objectives of the doctoral study.

The analysis paid particular attention to three forms of learner response: instances in which participants described textbook content as **confirming or reinforcing prior assumptions**; instances in which they recognized opportunities for **reflection or reconsideration**; and instances in which they identified a need for **greater diversity, contextualization, authentic perspectives, or direct intercultural engagement**. These patterns were not treated as predetermined judgments about the textbook but as interpretive categories through which participants' accounts could be organized and compared.

The broader doctoral analysis ultimately identified “**Reinforcing Learners' Preconceived Stereotypes**” as a prominent theme within the focus-group material. Participants' discussions suggested a tension between the textbook's capacity to introduce complex cultural subjects and its perceived capacity to move learners beyond assumptions they already held about Arab cultures. The present study revisits this dimension in greater depth by foregrounding learner reception rather than the broader textbook-evaluation objectives of the doctoral project.

3.5 Researcher Reflexivity

Because qualitative interpretation necessarily involves researcher judgment, attention was given in the original study to the researcher's own assumptions during analysis. The doctoral methodology documents the use of **bracketing to record initial assumptions and reflective journaling to trace the development of interpretations and maintain awareness of potential analytical bias**.

These procedures are particularly relevant to the present analysis because concepts such as stereotype, bias, and cultural representation are interpretive rather than purely descriptive categories. Accordingly, participants' statements were examined in relation to their expressed perceptions rather than being used to make generalized claims about Arab cultures or to establish that textbook representations objectively caused stereotypical beliefs.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical attention centered on informed participation, privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. Participants gave **explicit consent to audio recording**, declined video recording because of privacy concerns, and requested that their identities remain anonymous. Their real names were therefore excluded from the transcript and subsequent reporting. Personal identifiers were also removed during preparation of the focus-group data for analysis.

4. Findings

Analysis of the focus-group discussion revealed a complex relationship between learners' perceptions of *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya, Part Three* and their pre-existing understandings of Arab cultures. Participants did not characterize the textbook as either wholly stereotypical or wholly successful in challenging stereotypes. Rather, their responses indicated a tension between appreciating the textbook as an entry point into cultural learning and perceiving limitations in the depth, diversity, and critical engagement of some of its cultural representations.

Four interrelated themes emerged from the focused analysis: (1) **cultural exposure without sufficient representational depth**, (2) **recognition of stereotypes without sufficient deconstruction**, (3) **regional diversity and authentic voices as mechanisms for complicating stereotypes**, and (4) **direct intercultural engagement as a means of re-evaluating prior assumptions**.

4.1 Cultural Exposure Without Sufficient Representational Depth

The first theme concerned participants' recognition that *Al-Kitaab* provided meaningful exposure to the Arab world while simultaneously offering what some perceived as an incomplete or insufficiently differentiated cultural picture. Learners therefore did not dismiss the textbook's cultural contribution. Instead, they described it as a useful starting point that required greater representational depth.

Student 2 articulated this tension particularly clearly, describing *Al-Kitaab* as opening access to Arab cultures while remaining limited in the range of perspectives it presented:

"Al-Kitaab kinda opens the door to the Arab world, but it feels a bit narrow. It's like missing out on all the cool and diverse things that are going on in Arab societies. Sure, Al-Kitaab is a start, but we could really use more stories and perspectives to get a fuller picture." (Student 2)

This characterization of the textbook as a "start" is significant. It suggests that the participant did not perceive cultural representation as absent, but rather as insufficiently expansive to capture the diversity encountered across Arab societies. The learner specifically called for additional perspectives concerning different ways of living, politics, and literature, indicating a desire to move from introductory cultural exposure toward a more differentiated representation of the region.

A similar concern emerged in Student 1's discussion of the Arab Spring. Although the textbook was credited with establishing a foundation for understanding the Arab world, the participant felt that major historical and political developments required greater attention to complexity and lived experience:

"Al-Kitaab has certainly laid the groundwork in introducing us to the Arab world, but we really need to dig deeper than just skimming the surface." (Student 1)

The participant further suggested incorporating real-life examples and stories from individuals who had experienced the Arab Spring directly. Student 3 similarly argued that *Al-Kitaab* should incorporate real-world contexts and current events more effectively to provide learners with a deeper understanding of Arab cultures and their complexity.

These responses reveal an important distinction in learners' evaluations: the presence of cultural content was not considered equivalent to cultural depth. Participants generally recognized *Al-Kitaab* as providing access to cultural and sociopolitical issues, but several perceived that exposure as insufficient for understanding the internal complexity of Arab societies.

4.2 Recognition of Stereotypes Without Sufficient Deconstruction

The second theme concerned the distinction participants made between recognizing one's biases and actively reconsidering them. This was particularly evident in discussions of the textbook's self-reflective activities.

Student 5 acknowledged the value of these activities but argued that they did not consistently move learners beyond initial awareness:

"The self-reflective stuff in Al-Kitaab is a cool way to start thinking about our biases and views towards Arab cultures. But, you know, sometimes it feels like they just scratch the surface—all about recognizing prejudice without really getting into the hard work of breaking down those biases. We need some real eye-opening activities that really make us dig deep and transform how we see things." (Student 5)

This statement indicates that the participant did not perceive the textbook as ignoring prejudice. On the contrary, the textbook was seen as initiating reflection. The limitation concerned what occurred after recognition. For Student 5, awareness of a stereotype did not necessarily constitute its deconstruction.

Student 6 developed this point further by explicitly connecting cultural interpretation to learners' own backgrounds:

“The textbook talks about self-reflection, but I feel like it could do a lot more to push us to really think about how our cultural backgrounds influence our view of the Arab world. Like, instead of just activities, maybe we could have some in-depth discussions or even debates. It would help us dig deeper and be real with ourselves.” (Student 6)

The same participant later suggested organized debates, reflective writing, and critical-response essays as ways of moving learners beyond simply identifying bias toward actively reconsidering their assumptions.

The findings therefore suggest that the persistence of stereotypes may not result solely from the presence of stereotypical representations. It may also occur when pedagogical activities encourage learners to recognize bias without providing sufficient opportunities to interrogate, contextualize, and reconstruct prior assumptions. This interpretation is consistent with the broader doctoral analysis, which found that *Al-Kitaab* stimulated reflection and discussion around culturally sensitive issues but did not always lead learners to reassess previously held assumptions.

4.3 Regional Diversity and Authentic Voices as Mechanisms for Complicating Stereotypes

The third theme emerged from participants’ repeated calls for greater representation of diversity within the Arab world. Learners appeared particularly conscious of the risk of treating Arab culture as a homogeneous category and proposed materials that they believed could complicate such representations.

Student 2 emphasized the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity across the region:

“We need to shine a light on this diversity to show that there’s no one-size-fits-all Arab culture—it’s a crazy diverse tapestry!” (Student 2)

The participant proposed including more locally grounded material, such as stories, social-media content, and interactions with people from different backgrounds, so that learners could encounter variation in everyday life, traditions, and political experiences.

Student 3 similarly emphasized regional linguistic diversity and suggested including a broad range of authentic texts by Arab authors, including poetry, short stories, opinion pieces, and journalistic articles. The participant also proposed greater attention to dialects and idiomatic expressions to illustrate how Arabic language use varies across the region, explicitly referring to variation “from Morocco to Iraq.”

Participants also emphasized the importance of Arab voices speaking for themselves. Student 1 suggested including Arab authors and activists when addressing issues such as gender roles so that learners could see these issues as subjects of debate and social change rather than as fixed cultural characteristics.

Student 4 extended this argument by proposing contributions from Arab scholars and writers, virtual guest lectures, interviews with people living in different Arab countries, and personal forms of representation such as video diaries and blog entries:

“I think firsthand accounts like these are super important for going beyond stereotypes and truly embracing the rich reality of the Arab world.” (Student 4)

Across these responses, authenticity was associated with plurality rather than with a single authoritative representation of Arab culture. Participants wanted access to multiple authors, regions, dialects, social positions, everyday experiences, and contemporary debates. Their comments suggest that stereotypes may be more effectively challenged when learners encounter internal differences and competing perspectives within Arabic-speaking societies.

4.4 Direct Intercultural Engagement as a Means of Re-evaluating Prior Assumptions

The fourth theme moved beyond textbook representation itself. Several participants suggested that meaningful reconsideration of stereotypes required opportunities to interact directly with people from Arabic-speaking communities.

Student 7 proposed online conversations and collaborative projects with native Arabic speakers:

“Actually meeting and talking with people from various Arab communities would definitely shake things up and give us a much better learning experience. Having that direct contact would really push us to reevaluate our ideas, giving us real-life situations where we have to think critically.” (Student 7)

The significance of this response lies in the explicit connection between intercultural contact and the re-evaluation of prior beliefs. Rather than expecting the textbook alone to transform learners’ perceptions, the participant viewed direct interaction as a means of testing previously held assumptions against lived encounters.

Student 8 complemented this position by recommending greater incorporation of real-world issues and current events as a means of strengthening self-reflection. Student 4 similarly advocated interviews, guest contributions, video diaries, and personal accounts from people in different Arab countries as ways of enriching the learning experience and moving beyond stereotypical representations.

These responses indicate that participants did not advocate abandoning the textbook. Instead, they positioned *Al-Kitaab* as a foundation that could be supplemented by richer forms of intercultural engagement. The textbook could introduce topics and provide linguistic resources, while authentic voices, contemporary material, and interaction with Arabic speakers could expose learners to perspectives that complicate generalized representations.

4.5 Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the four themes reveal that the relationship between textbook representation and cultural stereotyping was neither linear nor uniformly negative. Participants acknowledged *Al-Kitaab*’s role in introducing them to significant cultural, historical, and political dimensions of the Arab world. At the same time, they repeatedly distinguished between cultural exposure and cultural depth, recognition and deconstruction of stereotypes, and textbook representation and lived intercultural engagement.

The findings indicate that *Al-Kitaab* can initiate reflection and expose learners to complex cultural topics, but these opportunities do not always progress far enough to destabilize prior assumptions. The data therefore do not support the simple conclusion that the textbook either challenges or reinforces stereotypes in a uniform way. Rather, learners described a more nuanced process in which some representations encouraged reflection while others were perceived as insufficiently diverse or critically developed to unsettle existing cultural frames.

The central pattern emerging from the data can therefore be summarized as a progression from **exposure to recognition, but not necessarily to deconstruction**. Participants’ responses suggest that deeper stereotype disruption may require greater representational diversity, authentic Arab voices, contemporary and locally grounded material, sustained critical reflection, and direct intercultural engagement. This interpretation is consistent with the broader doctoral analysis, which described *Al-Kitaab* as simultaneously stimulating discussion while at times appearing to confirm learners’ prior assumptions about Arab cultures.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the relationship between cultural representation in *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya, Part Three* and learners’ pre-existing stereotypes cannot be reduced to a simple process of either reinforcement or challenge. Participants generally acknowledged the textbook as an important source of cultural, historical, political, and social knowledge about the Arab world, yet they also identified limitations in the depth, diversity, and critical treatment of some representations. The central pattern emerging from their accounts was therefore one of **exposure and recognition without necessarily reaching deconstruction**. Learners could become aware of cultural differences and reflect on their own assumptions, but such awareness did not automatically result in the reconsideration of those assumptions.

This distinction is particularly significant when considered through the concept of intercultural communicative competence. Byram (1997) argues that intercultural learning involves more than acquiring knowledge about another culture; it also requires attitudes of openness, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) similarly emphasize that intercultural language education should enable learners to examine cultural perspectives critically, including the assumptions embedded in their own cultural positions. From this perspective, the participants' experiences suggest that the presence of cultural information in a textbook represents only one dimension of intercultural learning. What appears more consequential is whether learners are provided with opportunities to interrogate the interpretive frameworks through which they understand that information.

The distinction between exposure and critical engagement is also consistent with McConachy's (2018) examination of learners' responses to cultural representations in foreign-language textbooks. McConachy demonstrates that potentially problematic textbook representations do not necessarily lead to passive acceptance; when pedagogically mediated through critical reflection, they can become resources for intercultural learning. The present study supports this position while adding an important qualification. Participants acknowledged that *Al-Kitaab* encouraged some degree of self-reflection, yet several felt that the process did not progress sufficiently from recognizing prejudice toward actively dismantling it. Student 5, for example, distinguished explicitly between recognizing bias and undertaking the "hard work" of breaking down those biases. This suggests that stereotype recognition should be regarded as an intermediate rather than final stage of intercultural learning.

The first major theme, **cultural exposure without sufficient representational depth**, further illustrates this distinction. Participants did not reject *Al-Kitaab* as culturally inadequate. Instead, they repeatedly described it as a valuable foundation that could be developed further. Student 2 characterized the textbook as opening "the door to the Arab world" while simultaneously describing its perspective as somewhat narrow, whereas Student 1 argued that the textbook had "laid the groundwork" but needed to move beyond "skimming the surface." These accounts suggest that learners themselves differentiated between the **presence of cultural content** and the **depth of cultural representation**.

This distinction corresponds closely with recent research on foreign-language textbooks. Zhang et al. (2024), in their scoping review of 62 studies published between 2012 and 2022, found that cultural representation has become an increasingly prominent research concern while problems involving omission, simplification, imbalance, and misrepresentation remain evident. Their review also calls for greater attention to interaction and intersubjectivity, indicating that the analysis of cultural representation should extend beyond identifying what textbooks contain toward examining how cultural meanings are interpreted and negotiated. The present findings contribute directly to this latter concern by demonstrating that learners can value the cultural information provided by a textbook while simultaneously perceiving its representations as insufficiently complex.

The findings are particularly significant in relation to research on Arabic-as-a-foreign-language materials. Uzum et al. (2021), in their comparative analysis of Arabic, French, and German collegiate textbooks, found that target-language communities could be constructed through homogeneous and essentialized representations, with nation-state and tourism discourses sometimes obscuring complex and fluid cultural identities. Their analysis, which included *Al-Kitaab*, illustrates the broader representational challenge faced by textbooks attempting to introduce culturally heterogeneous language communities. The perspectives expressed by participants in the present study provide learner-based evidence that complements this textual analysis. Their repeated calls for broader perspectives, greater regional variation, and more locally grounded cultural material indicate that learners themselves were sensitive to the limitations of generalized representations.

This point is reinforced by Fahmi's (2026) recent analysis of *Al-Kitaab* and *Arabiyyat al-Naas*. Fahmi found a pronounced predominance of surface or objective cultural dimensions—such as places, communities, persons, and products—over deeper dimensions involving cultural practices and perspectives. The study argues that privileging generalized cultural elements can contribute to homogenization when localized cultural complexity receives insufficient attention. The present findings resonate strongly with this conclusion. Participants did not simply request “more culture”; they requested **more culturally differentiated and contextualized representations**. Their recommendations included contemporary social issues, lived experiences, different political perspectives, local stories, literature, journalism, dialects, and accounts from individuals situated across different Arab societies.

The second major finding, concerning **recognition of stereotypes without sufficient deconstruction**, also has implications for how cultural content is pedagogically conceptualized. Cultural knowledge alone cannot be assumed to produce critical cultural awareness. Within Byram's (1997) model, knowledge constitutes only one component of intercultural communicative competence; learners must also develop interpretive skills, openness to other perspectives, interactional capacities, and critical cultural awareness. The participants' accounts illustrate this distinction particularly clearly. They recognized that *Al-Kitaab* introduced self-reflective activities, but some questioned whether those activities sufficiently encouraged them to examine how their own cultural backgrounds shaped their perceptions of Arab societies. Student 6 specifically called for deeper discussions and debates that would push learners to consider how their backgrounds influenced their views.

The findings therefore complicate any claim that stereotypes are simply transmitted from textbooks to learners. Such a causal interpretation would not be supported by the present data. Participants entered the learning environment with existing cultural assumptions, and textbook representations interacted with those assumptions in different ways. Some content stimulated reflection, while other representations were perceived as corresponding with beliefs learners already held. The broader analysis of the dataset similarly indicated that *Al-Kitaab* could generate discussion while some of its representations appeared to confirm rather than destabilize learners' pre-existing perceptions. The relevant process is therefore better conceptualized as an interaction between **representation and reception** than as one-directional stereotype transmission.

This interpretation is compatible with McConachy's (2018) emphasis on learners as active interpreters of cultural representation. Learners do not simply absorb cultural meanings embedded in instructional materials; they interpret those meanings through their existing knowledge, experiences, and cultural frames. The present study extends this argument into the AFL context by demonstrating that advanced learners can simultaneously recognize the cultural value of a textbook, question aspects of its representation, and remain conscious of assumptions they themselves bring to the interpretive process.

The third theme, **regional diversity and authentic voices as mechanisms for complicating stereotypes**, emerged particularly strongly from participants' recommendations. Student 2 explicitly rejected the idea of a “one-size-fits-all Arab culture,” while Student 3 emphasized linguistic variation across contexts extending from Morocco to Iraq. These responses are significant because they indicate that learners did not conceptualize representational diversity merely in terms of increasing the quantity of cultural information. Instead, they associated diversity with exposure to different regions, dialects, political perspectives, genres, social positions, and lived experiences.

Such perceptions are consistent with broader concerns about essentialization in language textbooks. Uzum et al. (2021) demonstrate that textbook discourse may privilege homogeneous conceptions of target-language communities while minimizing fluid and complex identities. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2024) identify omission and misrepresentation among persistent concerns across foreign-language textbook research. Taqdir's (2025) systematic review of

cultural stereotypes in foreign-language textbooks further identifies recurring stereotypical representations and emphasizes the need for more inclusive and dynamic portrayals of cultural communities. Taken together with the present findings, this literature suggests that challenging stereotypes requires more than adding cultural facts; it requires making **internal cultural heterogeneity visible**.

This principle has particular relevance to AFL education. Arabic is associated with multiple national, regional, linguistic, religious, and social contexts, making any singular representation of “Arab culture” inherently restrictive. Fahmi’s (2026) findings regarding the predominance of surface culture in AFL textbooks provide an important context for interpreting participants’ calls for greater diversity. Their recommendations for Arab authors, activists, scholars, journalists, dialect speakers, and ordinary community members suggest that cultural complexity may become more visible when learners encounter individuals speaking from different social and geographical positions rather than encountering culture primarily through generalized explanatory material.

The emphasis on **authentic voices** is also important. Student 4 proposed interviews, guest contributions, video diaries, blogs, and other firsthand accounts, arguing that these forms of representation could help learners move beyond stereotypes and encounter the complexity of the Arab world. Such recommendations indicate that participants associated authenticity not with the existence of one definitive or “correct” representation of Arab culture, but with access to a plurality of situated voices. This interpretation aligns with the broader intercultural orientation advocated by Byram et al. (2002), in which learners encounter different perspectives and develop the capacity to interpret and relate them rather than seeking a single authoritative cultural description.

The fourth major finding concerned **direct intercultural engagement**. Participants repeatedly suggested that textbook-mediated cultural learning should be supplemented through interaction with people from Arabic-speaking communities. Student 7 proposed conversations and collaborative projects with native Arabic speakers and explicitly argued that direct contact would encourage learners to reevaluate their ideas. This recommendation is particularly relevant to Byram’s (1997) emphasis on skills of discovery and interaction as essential components of intercultural communicative competence. From this perspective, intercultural understanding develops not only through acquiring information but also through encountering unfamiliar perspectives, interpreting them, and negotiating meaning through interaction.

Participants’ recommendations also reposition the textbook within a broader pedagogical ecology. Rather than suggesting that *Al-Kitaab* should be abandoned, they appeared to view it as a foundation that could be supplemented with direct interaction, contemporary media, personal narratives, literature, journalism, and other authentic resources. This is an important distinction. The findings do not imply that a textbook must independently represent the entire diversity of Arabic-speaking societies—an impossible expectation for any single instructional resource. Instead, they suggest that teachers can mediate the inevitable selectivity of textbook representation by introducing additional perspectives and creating opportunities for learners to question, compare, and contextualize what they encounter.

This leads to a broader distinction between **textbook representation and pedagogical mediation**. Representation concerns which cultural meanings, identities, practices, and perspectives become visible in instructional materials. Pedagogical mediation concerns what teachers and learners do with those representations. McConachy (2018) demonstrates that even problematic representations can become productive when learners are encouraged to examine them critically. The participants in the present study similarly proposed debates, reflective writing, critical-response activities, and sustained discussions as ways of moving beyond recognition toward deeper reconsideration of cultural assumptions.

This distinction has practical implications for advanced Arabic instruction. Textbooks should not necessarily be treated as authoritative representations of the Arab world but as **texts that can themselves become objects of critical inquiry**. Learners can be asked whose

perspectives are represented, which communities are absent, whether a particular example is presented as local or general, how a cultural issue might be understood differently across Arab societies, and how learners' own backgrounds influence their interpretations. Such practices are consistent with Byram's (1997) notion of critical cultural awareness and McConachy's (2018) emphasis on critically engaging with textbook representations.

The study also contributes to literature by foregrounding **learner reception**, an area that remains less developed than textbook content analysis. Zhang et al. (2024) identify interaction and intersubjectivity as important directions for future cultural-representation research, while Taqdir (2025) highlights the need for greater attention to teachers' and students' perceptions of stereotypical textbook content. The present study responds to this need by examining not simply whether researchers can identify problematic representations in *Al-Kitaab*, but whether learners themselves perceive cultural material as challenging, confirming, or complicating their assumptions.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted within the boundaries of the study. The eight participants were advanced American learners of Arabic studying in a particular educational context in Rabat, Morocco. Their specialization in diplomacy and politics may also have influenced their sensitivity to political discourse, cultural representation, and regional diversity. The findings therefore cannot be generalized to all learners of Arabic or all users of *Al-Kitaab*. Instead, they provide situated qualitative evidence of how one group of experienced learners interpreted cultural representation after sustained engagement with the textbook.

Overall, the findings suggest that the question posed in the title—whether language textbooks challenge or reinforce cultural stereotypes—cannot be answered through a simple binary. *Al-Kitaab* was perceived as capable of introducing cultural complexity and stimulating reflection, but participants did not consistently experience that reflection as sufficient to dismantle pre-existing assumptions. The more useful distinction emerging from the study is therefore between **exposure, recognition, and deconstruction**. Exposure provides learners with cultural material; recognition enables them to become aware of difference and possible bias; deconstruction requires sustained opportunities to interrogate assumptions, encounter competing perspectives, and reconsider established interpretive frames.

The pedagogical implication is that stereotype disruption depends not solely on the amount of cultural content included in a textbook, but on the interaction among **representational diversity, learner interpretation, and pedagogical mediation**. For advanced AFL education, this means complementing textbook content with multiple Arab voices, regional and linguistic diversity, contemporary and locally situated perspectives, critical-reflection activities, and opportunities for direct intercultural engagement. Such an approach can move cultural learning beyond the transmission of information toward a more reflexive process in which learners actively negotiate and reconsider how they understand the Arab world.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how advanced learners of Arabic perceived and negotiated cultural representations in *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya, Part Three*, with particular attention to whether these representations challenged, reinforced, or complicated learners' pre-existing stereotypes about Arab cultures. Drawing on qualitative focus-group data from eight advanced American learners of Arabic, the findings reveal a relationship that is more complex than a straightforward distinction between stereotype reinforcement and stereotype disruption.

Participants generally recognized *Al-Kitaab* as a valuable resource for introducing learners to cultural, historical, political, and social dimensions of the Arab world. At the same time, they perceived limitations in the depth and diversity of some of its cultural representations. Their accounts suggest that exposure to cultural content can initiate reflection without necessarily producing a substantial reconsideration of previously held assumptions. In particular, participants distinguished between becoming aware of bias and engaging in the

deeper process of interrogating and reconstructing the cultural frames through which they understood Arab societies.

A central finding of the study is therefore that **cultural exposure does not automatically lead to stereotype deconstruction**. Participants valued opportunities for self-reflection but called for pedagogical activities that would move beyond recognizing prejudice toward critically examining how their own cultural backgrounds and previous experiences influenced their interpretations of the Arab world. Their recommendations included sustained discussion, structured debates, reflective writing, and other activities requiring learners to reconsider rather than merely identify their assumptions.

The findings further highlight the importance of representing the Arab world as internally diverse rather than culturally homogeneous. Participants called for greater inclusion of regional variation, dialects, contemporary issues, literature, journalism, social-media content, and perspectives from Arab authors, activists, scholars, and ordinary community members. Their responses suggest that authentic voices and multiple perspectives may help learners recognize that cultural practices and identities vary considerably across Arabic-speaking societies. Student 2's rejection of a "one-size-fits-all Arab culture" captures this concern particularly clearly.

Direct intercultural engagement also emerged as an important means of moving beyond generalized representations. Participants proposed virtual conversations, collaborative projects, interviews, and other forms of interaction with Arabic speakers from different communities. Such encounters were viewed as opportunities to confront previously held assumptions with lived perspectives and to develop more nuanced understandings of cultural difference.

These findings have implications for both textbook development and classroom practice. For textbook designers, cultural inclusion should involve more than increasing the quantity of cultural information. Greater attention is needed to the **depth, plurality, contemporaneity, and contextualization** of cultural representations. For language educators, the findings indicate that textbooks should not necessarily be treated as complete or authoritative representations of target-language cultures. Teachers can instead use textbook content as a starting point for comparison, questioning, discussion, and engagement with alternative perspectives. In this way, even partial or contested representations can become opportunities for intercultural inquiry.

The study nevertheless has several limitations. Its findings are based on the perspectives of eight advanced American learners studying Arabic in a specific educational context in Rabat, Morocco. The small and relatively homogeneous participant group limits the transferability of the findings to other populations of Arabic learners. Moreover, the study examines learners' reported perceptions rather than directly measuring changes in stereotypes over time. It therefore cannot establish a causal relationship between exposure to *Al-Kitaab* and the formation, reinforcement, or reduction of stereotypes.

Future research could address these limitations by examining learners from different linguistic, national, and educational backgrounds and by comparing different Arabic-language textbook series and proficiency levels. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for investigating whether learners' cultural perceptions change over extended periods of textbook use. Future studies could also combine textbook analysis, learner interviews, classroom observation, and pre- and post-instruction measures to examine more closely how textbook representation, teacher mediation, authentic materials, and intercultural contact interact in shaping learners' understandings of Arab cultures.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that asking whether a language textbook simply **challenges or reinforces cultural stereotypes** may obscure the more complex processes involved in cultural learning. *Al-Kitaab* provided participants with opportunities to encounter and reflect on Arab cultures, but reflection did not invariably translate into the deconstruction of prior assumptions. The more important pedagogical question is therefore how language textbooks and classroom practices can create conditions in which learners move from **exposure, to**

recognition, to critical reconsideration. For advanced Arabic language education, this requires representing the Arab world not as a single cultural entity, but as a dynamic and internally diverse space characterized by multiple voices, experiences, perspectives, and ongoing social change.

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