Lebanese University Students’ Perceptions of Ethnic, National, and Linguistic Identity and Their Preferences for Foreign Language Learning in Lebanon

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Biodata

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate Lebanese university students’ perceptions of their ethnic, national, and linguistic identity and their preferences for choice of first foreign language (FL) and medium of instruction in pre-university schools in Lebanon. The study also aimed at exploring the differences in perceptions of identity and preferences for FL learning in Lebanon between male and female students, students from different religious backgrounds (Muslim and Christian), and students whose first FL is English and those whose first FL is French. Eighty-six students completed a survey, and follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 students in order to clarify responses and obtain more in-depth data. Findings revealed that the Lebanese university students in this study valued the importance of English as an essential language to know, mostly because of the practical importance of English as an international language, while some students whose first FL is French expressed a strong affiliation with the French language and culture. Moreover, students from a Christian religious background were much more likely than their Muslim counterparts to construct an identity of
themselves that is ethnically and culturally distinct from the rest of the Arab World. Finally, the first FL learned was an important factor influencing these students’ preferences for choice of medium of instruction.

**Key Words:** Identity; English as a Foreign Language; French as a Foreign Language; Medium of instruction; Religious background; Lebanon

**Introduction**

Lebanon is an established multilingual society with three active languages, Arabic, the native language, and two important foreign languages, English and French (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2002). The arrival of Western missionaries in Lebanon in the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, the colonization by France right after the end of World War I until Lebanese independence in 1943, and the emergence of English as a leading international language for business, technology, and communication, all had a major influence on the learning and teaching of English and French in Lebanon. Following the establishment of religious ties between various Lebanese religious communities and the West, competing missionaries, primarily French Jesuits and American Protestants (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1999), established several schools in the country, exposing the Lebanese to Western cultures and languages. In addition, during the period of the French mandate (1920-1943), the French language became an official language in Lebanon in addition to Arabic; French was taught in all schools and was the medium of instruction for sciences, mathematics, and social studies at all levels of education (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1999).

After the Lebanese independence in 1943, Arabic became the only official language in Lebanon; moreover, in 1946, English became one of the two compulsory foreign languages in secondary schools (along with French), and the Lebanese government’s official curriculum for public schools gave equal importance to French and English, which remained “deeply rooted in the Lebanese educational system” (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1996, p. 101) and both remained dominant as media of instruction in many Lebanese schools. Economic reasons mostly contributed to this spread of foreign languages as media of instruction, especially English, which at that time was starting to become more influential than French in Lebanon, mainly because of the international influence of the United States and the growing importance of the English language in international business, science, and technology. Up to and during the civil war
in Lebanon (1975-1989), Arabic-French bilingualism remained an important identity marker for certain Christian groups, while Muslims viewed Arabic as an essential symbol of their identity, one that links them to the rest of the Arab world (Suleiman, 2006).

Currently, the traditional cultural-linguistic conflict between Arabic and foreign languages as media of instruction is being gradually replaced by a struggle between English and French, with English gaining ground so far, mainly because of economic and practical considerations (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1999). Along the same lines, Constantine (1995) argues that the importance of the French culture and language in Lebanon has been gradually weakening, mainly because of the competition from American culture. Moreover, Suleiman (2006) argues that

in Lebanese linguistic politics, the reduction in the power of Arabic and French to index group and national identity constructions is part of an ongoing realignment in favor of a more utilitarian perspective on languages that values them, first and foremost, for their economic relevance... English in Lebanon has therefore gained considerably at the expense of French (p. 130)

Several recent studies have also supported the notion of English being perceived as more useful and practical than French, even among those whose first FL is French (Abou, Kasparian & Haddad, 1996; Ghaleb & Joseph, 2002; Shaaban & Ghaith, 2002).

On the other hand, according to Suleiman (2003), “the presence of French in Lebanon is endowed with political, religious and cultural connotations that bear directly on questions of the conceptualization of national identity, in spite of the fact that the official status of the language was dropped after independence in 1943” (pp. 205-206). Politically, French supports the concept of a Lebanese national identity that views Lebanon as separate from Arab nationalism, and proponents of French in Lebanon stress its role as an important medium of cultural and religious expression that helps the Christian Lebanese maintain ties with the Christian West, mainly France (Suleiman, 2003). According to Simpson (2007),

[a]s a symbolic marker and index of individual and group identity, language has the potential to function as an important boundary device, separating distinct sub-populations off from neighbouring others with different, possibly unintelligible language habits, and binding the former together with shared feelings of identity and group self interest (p. 1).
This argument definitely applies to many Christian Lebanese who function fluently and often dominantly in French and emphasize the importance and prestige of the French language and culture.

Similarly, Joseph (2004), who provides an examination of Lebanese language/identity patterns, argues that, in spite of the fact that proficiency in English is currently very highly valued in Lebanon and that recent Lebanese educational policies advocate trilingualism in Arabic-English-French, Arabic-French bilingualism remains a prominent identity marker for many Lebanese, particularly Christian Lebanese, who are therefore likely to hold different perceptions of their ethnic, national, and linguistic identity than Muslim Lebanese. According to Suleiman (2006), there are two identity constructs involved: “an Arab Lebanon versus a Lebanese Lebanon. The former is of the Arab Middle East and the latter is in the Arab Middle East” (p.132). More specifically, according to Suleiman (2003),

[support for French on the Lebanese cultural scene is generally linked to conceptualizations of Lebanese national identity which propel it outside the Arab orbit and lodge it in the sphere of a Western or non-Islamic Mediterranean culture... Lebanese national identity is therefore not purely Arab or purely Western, but must partake of both to remain genuinely authentic and true to its roots. The presence of French is seen now as part of a long-established multilingual tradition in Lebanon which takes the country back to the times of the Phoenicians, for whom multilingualism was a fact of life. (p. 205)

Indeed, some Christian Lebanese deny that they are Arab and hold the firm belief that they are direct descendants of the Phoenicians, thereby claiming an “older, historical-cultural presence than their Muslim countrymen” (Joseph, 2004, p. 209). As Kraidy (1998) aptly points out, Lebanon apparently suffers from an “identity crisis.” Is Lebanon, as some Lebanese argue, “a unique country with Phoenician ascendance, Western affinities, distinct from its Arab environment,” (p. 3) or is it an inseparable part of the Arab world, sharing the history, culture, and ethnic identity of its neighboring Arab countries? It is expected that the answer to this question will vary considerably depending on several factors, including the religious background of the Lebanese respondent. Thus, this factor obviously plays an important role in influencing Lebanese students’ perceptions of ethnic, national, and linguistic identity and their preferences for foreign language learning.

Moreover, being either “French-educated” or “English-educated” is a salient identity marker in Lebanon (Diab, 2006). Most Lebanese students today belong to one of the two dominant types of schools: “English-medium” (which introduce English before French and use it as a medium of
instruction) and “French-medium” (which introduce French before English and use it as a medium of instruction). Shaaban and Ghaith’s (2003) survey of university students’ perceptions of the utility of Arabic, English, and French in Lebanon revealed that, in addition to religious background, the first foreign language studied at school (English vs. French) influenced the linguistic attitudes of students in Lebanon towards these three languages. Similarly, in Diab’s (2006) survey of Lebanese university students’ beliefs about language learning, first foreign language learned was a prominent factor influencing students’ beliefs about learning English and French. For many Lebanese, studying at French-medium schools and being fluent in French is an essential aspect of their identity, one that separates them from non-French speaking Lebanese. Thus, the first FL studied, in addition to religious background, may obviously play a major role influencing Lebanese students’ preferences for choice of medium of instruction (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2003). A third possibly influential factor is gender, since females may have more positive attitudes towards foreign language learning than males (Abu-Rabia & Feuerverger, 1996; Diab, 2000).

The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate Lebanese university students’ perceptions of ethnic, national, and linguistic identity (i.e. their definition of “Arab”, of “Lebanese”, whether they believe Lebanese people are “Arabs,” and what language(s) in their opinion are essential to know in Lebanon) and their preferences for choice of first foreign language (FL) and medium of instruction in pre-university schools in Lebanon. The study aimed at exploring the differences in perceptions of ethnic, national, and linguistic identity and preferences for foreign language learning in Lebanon between male and female students, students from different religious backgrounds (Muslim and Christian), and students whose first foreign language is English and those whose first foreign language is French. Specifically, the study aimed at addressing the following research questions:

1. What are Lebanese university students’ perceptions of “Arab” and “Lebanese” identity?
2. What languages do Lebanese university students believe are essential to know in Lebanon?
3. What are Lebanese university students’ preferences for choice of first FL and of medium of instruction in Lebanon?
4. Are there any differences in Lebanese university students’ perceptions of ethnic, national, and linguistic identity related to gender, first FL, or religious background?
5. Are there any differences in Lebanese university students’ preferences for FL learning related to gender, first FL, or religious background?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 86 Lebanese students at an English-medium private university in Lebanon. Forty-five percent of the participants were males and 55% females, and they ranged in age between 18 and 28, with a median age of 20. The participants came from a variety of disciplines, namely natural sciences (34%), business (23%), humanities (15%), engineering (14%), social sciences (9%), and computer science (5%). In addition, 63% of the students studied English as their first FL and attended English-medium pre-university schools, while 37% studied French as their first FL and attended French-medium schools. Moreover, 65% stated that they are Muslim, while the remaining 35% specified that they were Christian. Finally, all 86 participants stated that their native language is Arabic.

Instrument

A questionnaire (see Appendix) was devised by the researcher in order to investigate the students’ perceptions of ethnic, national, and linguistic identity and their preferences for choice of first FL and medium of instruction in pre-university schools in Lebanon. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first one included background items in order to obtain background information about the respondents, such as their religious background and first FL learned. The second section addressed the students’ ethnic, national, and linguistic identity and preferences for FL learning in Lebanon. In an attempt to elicit detailed responses, the survey contains three open-ended questions in the second section (namely items 1, 3, & 8). In addition, the remaining five closed-ended questions all have an option for respondents to provide alternative responses. Finally, all the items in the second section were used as guide questions for the semi-structured interviews, in order to clarify and obtain more in-depth responses.
**Procedure**

Invitations to participate in the study and copies of the survey were sent to a random sample of 150 students; 91 students responded (61% response rate), but five were excluded because the respondents were not Lebanese but international students. In order to triangulate the study and obtain more in-depth responses, the 86 students were again invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Twenty-four students volunteered to participate: 10 male and 14 female students, 15 students whose first FL is English and 9 whose first FL is French, and 10 Christian and 14 Muslim students. The interviews lasted from around twenty-five minutes to an hour and 10 minutes. All interviews were done voluntarily and the participants’ confidentiality was assured. Participants were encouraged to speak frankly and could respond either in English or in Arabic. Since the researcher is a Lebanese who speaks Arabic, most of them chose to respond in Lebanese Arabic but, as is often the case in the Lebanese multilingual setting, they frequently code-switched into English and sometimes into French. Similarly to Kim (2003), the status of the researcher as an “insider” helped in understanding the complexities and subtleties of the participants’ responses, which would have not been possible for a non-Lebanese researcher.

**Data Analysis**

Survey data were analyzed by summarizing the responses to the background items and calculating percentages for the closed-ended items. In addition, the students’ responses to the free-response items were categorized and summarized. Moreover, cross-tabulations and chi-square tests were computed in order to investigate the relationship between the background variables (gender, first FL learned, and religious background) on the one hand and identity and preferences for FL learning on the other. As for the interview data, they were analyzed qualitatively by developing coding strategies and trying to identify concepts and categories in the data. After preliminary coding categories were established, the transcripts were examined further in order to identify more categories or subcategories. Finally, a set of codes was established and the data were scrutinized and labeled accordingly. Several dominant themes emerged from this qualitative analysis.
Results and Discussion

Perceptions of ethnic, national, and linguistic identity

In order to address the first research question, the students’ responses to the relevant items in the questionnaire were summarized. In response to the question: “Who would you identify as Lebanese?” the students provided a variety of responses, ranging from the expected political definition of “anyone holding the Lebanese passport/nationality” (28 respondents), “anyone born in Lebanon” (15 respondents), anyone with Lebanese parents (14 respondents), and “anyone whose ancestors are Lebanese” (9 respondents) to unusual descriptions such as “anyone who speaks three languages: Arabic, English and French” (3 respondents). Moreover, four students emphasized that a Lebanese can be of any religion and is “multicultural and open.” Finally, it is worth mentioning that four respondents provided responses that were meant to be humorous but that are nevertheless indicative of their perceptions of what it means to be “Lebanese”: “someone who can take advantage of all situations,” “smart, manipulative,” and “has no sense of patriotism to the country, only loyal to a particular religious group or political party.”

Moreover, there was considerable variety in the students’ responses to the two questions “Who would you identify as Arab?” and “Would you include Lebanese people in your definition of Arab?” Regarding the first question, most students (60%) defined an Arab as one who speaks Arabic as a native language, 19% stated that an Arab is one who is a citizen of specific countries in the Middle East, 13% replied that Arabs are people living in the Middle East, and only 8% stated that Arabs are citizens of Islamic countries.

Regarding the second question, most respondents (75%) included Lebanese people in their definition of Arabs, while 25% did not. Consistently with the responses to the first question, the majority of respondents who answered in the affirmative to the second question provided the linguistic factor as a reason: Since Lebanese people speak Arabic, then they are Arabs (63%). The other two reasons provided were the location or geography of Lebanon (25%) and shared history/culture with other Arab countries (16%).
Analyses of the interview data confirmed the above findings and further revealed interesting discrepancies in students’ perceptions of Lebanese ethnic identity. Two emergent themes were the issue of Phoenician/non-Arab vs. Arab Lebanese ethnic identity and the argument that “Arab does not equal Islam” vs. the counter-argument that non-Muslims cannot be considered Arab. Students from a Christian religious background tended to have very different opinions about the first issue than students from a Muslim religious background. Interestingly, some respondents emphasized the fact that other Lebanese may not share their opinion. For instance, a female Muslim student whose first FL is English stated that “even if many Lebanese people refuse to acknowledge their Arabic origins, they are Arabs.” Similarly, another female Muslim student with an English first FL background stated that “most Christians say they’re not Arab, that they’re Phoenician, but I think Arab represents a culture and does not pertain to just one origin.” Two additional Muslim students mentioned the Phoenician issue and that in their opinion, Lebanese are Arabs who are not descendents of the Phoenicians.

A few respondents also made a point that although they agree that Lebanese are Arabs, they also believe that they share some common characteristics with Western culture:

“We do not really share the same values and lifestyles of neighboring countries” (female Muslim student, first FL English)

“Lebanese people have other characteristics and culture that are different from Arabs” (female Muslim student, first FL French)

“I think Lebanese people identify with Western thought… the community has a mixture of Arab and Western values” (female Muslim, English first FL)

“Some Lebanese are inclined to the West and cannot be fully identified as Arab” (female Christian student, English first FL)

Most striking were some of the responses that were provided by students who did not agree that Lebanese people are Arabs:

“I think Arab civilization is far from the Lebanese civilization” (male Christian, English first FL)

“To my knowledge, Arab is a race attributed to those living in the Gulf region. In general, Lebanese are not Arabs unless their ancestors trace back to people from that (Gulf) region” (female Christian, English first FL)

“Arabs are citizens of specific countries in the Middle East and Gulf, such as
Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Lebanese people are not part of these countries. They are just neighbors. In fact, Lebanese people come from an independent civilization called Phoenicians. This is why I do not include them in my definition of Arab” (male Christian, French first FL)
“I consider my origin as Phoenician, not Arab” (male Christian, French first FL)
“We’re originally Phoenician but some people who are Lebanese think they’re Arab and who am I to argue with them” (male Christian, English first FL)

Moreover, two respondents, one Christian and one Muslim, focused on the issue of religious background and affirmed that “Arab does not equal Muslim, so Lebanese, even though some are not Muslim, are still Arabs”. On the other hand, two other Christian students stated that “Arab connotates Islamic people living in an Islamic country. Lebanese are not Arabs” and “Only Lebanese Muslim people should be included in my definition of Arab.”

As seen above, religious background seems to have an influence on the students’ perceptions of ethnic identity. Indeed, as will be revealed by the cross-tabulations and chi-square computations, there are significant differences between Muslim and Christian students specifically in their construction of Lebanese ethnic identity as Arab or non-Arab.

In order to address the second research question, the students’ responses to items 4 and 6 were summarized. In response to the question: “What is/are the most important foreign language(s) one should learn, and be fluent in, in Lebanon?”, the overwhelming majority of respondents (82%) chose both English and French, 16% chose only English, and only 2% chose only French. Consistently, in response to the question “What foreign language(s) do you want your children to be fluent in?” most students (80%) chose both English and French, 19% chose only English, and 1% chose only French. It is also interesting to note that some students were very enthusiastic about foreign language learning in general, proud that the Lebanese are “fluent speakers of foreign languages,” and wanted their children to know, in addition to “the usual” (i.e. English and French), Spanish, German, and “as many languages as possible.”

Data from the interviews supported the findings about the value and importance of English and French as foreign languages in Lebanon. However, the interviews also revealed attitudes about the
relative importance of these two languages and the reasons behind the students’ motivation to learn them. Not surprisingly, all students agreed that English is essential to know, mostly because of instrumental reasons and the importance of English as an international language, but only those students whose first FL is French expressed a strong affiliation with the French language and culture and believed that it is important to know French in Lebanon because “it’s part of our identity,” as expressed by one female Christian student. Two excerpts that clearly illustrate this difference are the following:

Of course I would want my children to know French. I cannot imagine not using French, with my parents, friends, everywhere. You know, once I was on a plane and the woman sitting next to me did not realize I was not from France until I told her. She then said, “ah of course, all Lebanese speak French very well” (male Christian student, first FL French)

There’s no real reason to know French, not like English. English is essential, for everything, for our education, career. I wouldn’t really care if my children learned French or not, but English is a matter of life or death, of being successful and making it or not (male Christian student, first FL English)

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that some students who emphasized the important instrumental reasons for knowing English may have deeper cultural connections to the language; specifically, students who believe that Lebanese are different from Arabs may obviously regard being fluent in either English or French as an important identity marker of a “non-Arab” Lebanese. According to Simpson (2007), learning English as a foreign language in Asia ranges across a continuum from one extreme of learning the language in the same way that other skills may be acquired, such as the case of many EFL learners in Japan, to the other extreme of having “elite” English-speaking groups in many countries in Asia who are perceived as detached from other members of the population. It is safe to assume that in the Lebanese case, most English speakers would fall somewhere in between and some would definitely be closer to the “elite English-speaking” end of the continuum.

Preferences for foreign language learning in Lebanon

In order to address the third research question, the students’ responses to items 5 and 7 were summarized. In response to the question: “What language should be the medium of instruction in Lebanese schools?” the majority of students (78%) chose both English and French as possible media of instruction, 18% chose only English, 3% chose Arabic, and 1% chose only French. In addition, in
response to the question “What foreign language would you want your children to start studying first?” 58% chose English, 28% chose French, and 14% stated that they would prefer that both languages are taught at the same time.

The interview data supported the above findings and provided more in-depth responses regarding the students’ preferences for foreign language learning in Lebanon. One emergent theme was the importance of knowing foreign languages in Lebanon and pride that the Lebanese are fluent in foreign languages:

We speak foreign languages amazingly well, and we’re proud of that. Knowing two (foreign) languages gives us a big advantage compared to other countries (female Christian student, French first FL)

Lebanon is known for being that way (multilingual). That is why Lebanese are distinguished outside. Both English and French should be emphasized (in schools) (female Christian student, English first FL)

It’s great that Lebanese people are so good at speaking foreign languages (male Muslim student, English first FL)

Lebanese people are prominent immigrants so it’s important for them to know many foreign languages (male Muslim student, English first FL)

Another theme that emerged was the students’ preferences for medium of instruction and their opinions about the relative importance and relative difficulty of learning English and French in Lebanon. Similarly to the Lebanese university students in Diab (2006), the respondents believed that learning French before English makes it easier to learn both languages. Some students also suggested that English and French should be taught as equally important foreign languages. When it came to choosing medium of instruction, however, these same students went back to choosing the FL that matches the one they have studied first. The following are some excerpts illustrating this issue:

Most French-educated students are fluent in both French and Arabic and have a good command of the English language. Most English-educated students have a good command of English and Arabic but barely know French. I think students should be encouraged to pursue a third language… Even if English is used (as medium of instruction), French should be emphasized more (female Christian student, English first FL)
I think French should be the medium of instruction, since it’s really easier to be good in both languages (English and French) if you study French first (male Christian student, French first FL)
I don’t think it’s necessary to have French as medium of instruction in schools, but we can just learn it as a foreign language. If we learn French first, probably we will speak both (French and English) very well, but English is much more important because it’s more international (male Christian student, English first FL)
French should be the medium of instruction because we can learn English easily. We need fluency in both equally. It’s easier if we start learning French before English (male Muslim student, French first FL)
English is very important but French is becoming extinct. We should replace it by German, Japanese, or Chinese (male Muslim student, English first FL)

Not surprisingly, first FL background seems to have an influence on the students’ preferences for choice of first FL. Indeed, as will be revealed by the cross-tabulations and chi-square computations, there are significant differences between students whose first FL is English and those whose first FL is French in their preferences for choice of first FL in Lebanon.

A final emergent theme from the interviews related to students’ preferences for foreign language learning was the importance of Arabic as the native language and the danger of Arabic being “abandoned or allowed to deteriorate,” as stated by a female Muslim student whose first FL is English:
We need to strengthen our Arabic skills, as it is our native language, and it is part of our identity (female Muslim student, English first FL)
In school Arabic should be stressed more. People are learning so many languages in Lebanon to the extent that they are forgetting Arabic (male Muslim student, English first FL)
Arabic is our mother tongue so it should get some priority. I don’t think we can use it as medium of instruction though. It would be hard to do that, because we are so used to learning sciences and so on in either English or French (female Muslim student, French first FL)
It’s very beneficial to know foreign languages, but they shouldn’t become part of our own culture. People here have psychological complexes. We want to be like them (speakers of English and French). We think if we speak foreign languages we’ll be like them (male Muslim student, French first FL)
The above excerpts are in line with Shaaban’s (1990) argument concerning the “Arabization” of education in Lebanon. While some Lebanese groups have been trying to advocate making Arabic the official and only medium of instruction, other groups vehemently oppose such a policy. He provides the example of the (then) Minister of Education in Lebanon, a Maronite Christian, stating in 1991 that “under no circumstances would we think of Arabizing education in Lebanon,” (as cited in Shaaban, p. 25), a strong statement that the Lebanese Makassed Islamic Philanthropic Association reacted angrily to, since this association had initiated a project to Arabize the teaching of mathematics and sciences at the elementary and intermediate levels in its schools. Moreover, according to Shaaban, using English or French as a medium of instruction can be considered “a form of conscious identification with the West” for some groups in Lebanon, who feel that knowledge of foreign languages and cultures, namely French and English, “sets them apart from the rest of the Arabs and brings them closer to the western heritage” (p. 25). It seems that such feelings are still prominent among some Lebanese, as shown by the last excerpt above.

Relationship between background variables and perceptions of ethnic, national, and linguistic identity
In order to address the fourth research question, cross-tabulations and chi-square tests were computed to test for differences in ethnic, national, and linguistic identity between male and female students, students whose first FL is English and those whose first FL is French, and students from different religious backgrounds (Muslim and Christian). Findings revealed one significant difference between Christian and Muslim students in their responses to the question “Would you include Lebanese people in your definition of Arab?” (df=1, chi-square=12.356, p=.000) Table 1 shows the cross-tabulation.

Table 1: Religious background and perceptions of Lebanese Arab vs. non-Arab ethnic identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lebanese Arab ethnic identity</th>
<th>Lebanese non-Arab ethnic identity</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in Table 1, in line with the arguments outlined earlier regarding the influence of religious background on Lebanese perceptions of ethnic, national, and linguistic identity (Joseph, 2004; Suleiman,
2003), the overwhelming majority of Muslim students perceived Lebanese as Arabs, while the Christian students were much more evenly divided in their perceptions. Thus, not surprisingly, the latter are much more likely to construct an identity of themselves that is ethnically and culturally distinct from the rest of the Arab World.

**Relationship between background variables and preferences for foreign language learning in Lebanon**

In order to address the fifth research question, cross-tabulations and chi-square tests were computed to test for differences in preferences for foreign language learning between male and female students, students whose first FL is English and those whose first FL is French, and students from different religious backgrounds (Muslim and Christian). Findings revealed one significant difference related to first foreign language learned in response to the question “What language(s) do you want your children to learn first?” (df=2, chi-square=12.725, p=.002). Table 2 shows the cross-tabulations.

**Table 2: First FL learned and choice of first FL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English First</th>
<th>French First</th>
<th>English and French at the Same Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First FL English</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First FL French</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in Table 2, while most students whose first FL is English prefer that their children learn English first, only 38% of students whose first FL is French do so. Even more strikingly, half the latter would like their children to learn French first, while only 15% of the former chose this option. This finding is especially revealing in light of the fact that most Lebanese believe that learning French before English is easier or better (Diab, 2006); nevertheless, very few of these English-educated students, even though they would like their children to know French, would want them to learn French first. This finding can be explained by the arguments made earlier regarding the first FL studied being a salient identity marker in Lebanon. Thus, those whose first FL is English and come from English-medium
schools would want their children to continue in this tradition, in spite of believing that learning French first would make it easier to learn both languages. At the same time, those whose first FL is French, in addition to wanting their children to know English because it is an important international language, would still want their children to learn French first and become fluent in French as an important aspect of their identity.

Conclusions

Based on observations made in this study, three main conclusions may be drawn. First, in line with previous research (Abou, Kasparian & Haddad, 1996; Diab, 2006; Ghaleb & Joseph, 2002; Shaaban & Ghaith, 2002), the Lebanese university students in this study valued English as an essential language to know, mostly because of the importance of English as an international language rather than any affiliation with American or British culture, while some students whose first FL is French expressed a strong affiliation with the French language and culture, supporting Joseph’s (2004) argument that fluency in French remains an important identity marker for some Lebanese. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that even some students who emphasized the important instrumental reasons for knowing English may also view fluency in the English language an an important identity marker differentiating them from Arabs in neighboring countries.

Moreover, students from a Christian religious background were much more likely than their Muslim counterparts to construct an identity of themselves that is ethnically and culturally distinct from the rest of the Arab World, supporting the arguments made by Suleiman (2003) and Joseph (2004) regarding the influence of religious background on Lebanese perceptions of ethnic, national, and linguistic identity. Finally, in line with Diab (2006) and Shaaban & Ghaith (2003), the first FL learned was an important factor influencing these students’ preferences for choice of medium of instruction. Those whose first FL is English and come from English-medium schools would want their children to continue in this tradition, in spite of believing that learning French first would make it easier to learn both languages. At the same time, those whose first FL is French, in addition to wanting their children to know English because it is an important international language, would still want their children to learn French first and become fluent in French as an important aspect of their identity.
Since the student sample in this study was drawn from one English-medium university in Lebanon, it is obviously not representative of all Lebanese university students. Students enrolled in French-medium universities may hold different opinions regarding foreign language learning, as may students enrolled in public universities such as the Lebanese University, who typically come from a different socio-economic background than those in more expensive private universities. Thus, future research investigating the opinions of Lebanese students enrolled in public and French-medium universities and comparing them to those of the private English-medium university students who participated in this study may provide valuable insights and clarify further the complex relationships among the diverse Lebanese population.

Appendix: Questionnaire

Part I: Please complete the following items.

1) Sex: _____ Male _____ Female

2) Age: __________

3) Major: __________

4) Academic level: _____ Freshman _____ Sophomore _____ Junior _____ Senior _____ Graduate

5) Religion: _____ Christian _____ Druze _____ Muslim _____ Other (specify)

6) Nationality: __________________________

7) Language Background: First/Native Language: ____________

   1\(^{st}\) Foreign Language: ________________

   2\(^{nd}\) Foreign Language: ________________

   Other Languages: ________________

8) Language of instruction at the primary (elementary) school level: ____________

9) Language of instruction at the secondary (high school) level: ____________
Part II. Please answer the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers. The researcher is simply interested in your opinions.

1. Who would you identify as “Lebanese”?

2. Who would you identify as “Arab”?
   a) People living in the Middle East
   b) Citizens of specific countries in the Middle East
   c) People whose native language is Arabic
   d) Citizens of Islamic countries
   e) Others ____________________________

3. Would you include Lebanese people in your definition of “Arab”? Why or Why not?

4. What is/are the most important foreign language(s) one should learn, and be fluent in, in Lebanon?
   a) English
   b) French
   c) German
   d) Some Combination: _______________
   e) Other: ____________________________

5. What language should be the medium of instruction in Lebanese schools?
   a) Arabic
   b) English
   c) French
   d) German
   e) Some Combination: _______________
   f) Other: ____________________________
6. What foreign language(s) do you want your children to be fluent in?

   a) English
   b) French
   c) German
   d) Some Combination: ________________
   e) Other: _________________________

7. What foreign language(s) do you want your children to start studying first?

   a) English
   b) French
   c) German
   d) Some Combination: ________________
   e) Other: _________________________

8. What other comments do you have about foreign language learning in Lebanon?

References


