

Handbook for Students of Arabic

Introduction

Welcome to the study of Arabic. This online handbook is an introduction to strategies and resources that can help you, the student, in your study of the Arabic language. It has been developed under the auspices of the National Middle East Language Resource Center ([NMELRC](#))

This handbook is primarily for the beginning student, but intermediate and advanced students may also profit from this information. Although not comprehensive or exhaustive, this information is practical and will help you begin your study of Arabic. We hope that any “theory” it contains can be easily implemented in practice. We hope this handbook will help fulfill the NMELRC’s mission to be “a coordinated concentration of educational research and training resources for improving the capacity to teach and learn foreign languages.”

The handbook is divided into three sections:

- (1) a brief introduction to the Arabic language
- (2) a list of Frequently Asked Questions about studying Arabic
- (3) Additional resources for the Arabic student including links to web-based resources.

Section I: A Brief Introduction to Arabic

What is Arabic?

Arabic belongs to the Semitic family of languages. Besides Arabic, spoken languages in this family include Modern Hebrew, Amharic, Tigre, Tigrinya, Syriac, a few Aramaic dialects, and Maltese. 250 million people in the Arab world speak Arabic as their native language. Furthermore, 1.2 billion Muslims all over the world use Arabic in their prayers and religious recitations. Arabic is also the liturgical language of many Eastern Christian churches.

For practical purposes, we might divide Arabic into **three varieties**:

Classical Arabic is the oldest type of Arabic that is studied widely. It is the language of the Qur'an and texts from the classical age of the Islamic empire (including texts dealing with Qur'anic subjects), the Hadith (the record of the Prophet Muhammad's words and actions), Islamic law and theology, history, biography, geography, poetry, grammar, medicine, astronomy, and other sciences. Until a few decades ago, this was the type of Arabic most commonly taught in American universities. Classical Arabic is still used today, but is restricted to religious and highly formal contexts.

Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or *al-fuSHaa* is a direct descendant of Classical Arabic and is now the language of elevated discourse or correspondence, contemporary literature, and the mass media (whether newspaper, radio, television, or the internet). MSA is a formal, mainly written language that is not used for daily-life communications. There are no native speakers of Modern Standard Arabic, but the vast majority of the educated in the Arab world learn MSA through formal schooling. Although Arabs not educated formally cannot produce MSA, many can comprehend it because of the considerable overlap between the different varieties of Arabic. Modern Standard Arabic remains largely uniform throughout the Arab world.

Colloquial Arabic, or *'aammiyya*, refers to the regional dialects used in everyday discourse and popular culture media (music, movies, etc.). There are numerous dialects in the Arab world that vary along geographical, socio-economic, and religious lines. Arabs from one region can generally understand dialects from other regions, depending on proximity, exposure to other Arab dialects, education and command of MSA. In general, there are four major dialect groups in the Arab world today:

- (1) The Maghrib (Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, and Tunisia);
- (2) Libya and Egypt
- (3) The Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and parts of Iraq)
- (4) The Gulf Area (Saudi Arabia, Yemen, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar).

To become fluent in Arabic, you need to develop proficiency in MSA and one of the dialects. Your choice of which dialect to study depends on your academic and career goals.

Why study Arabic?

Students choose to study Arabic for a variety of reasons. Some study it as part of their academic work, and to satisfy general interest in the people and cultures of the Arabic-speaking world. Arabic can be useful to students with a background in political science or international studies who see the urgent demand for Arabic in contemporary world affairs. Some students take Arabic to help them get jobs both with the US government or non-government agencies operating in the Arab world. Students of Arab descent often take Arabic to better understand this heritage and gain familiarity with the language of a parent or grandparent. Muslim students usually take Arabic in order to read the Qur'an and other religious texts. Learning Arabic will open to you a vast body of literature and art, as well as offer opportunities for interaction with other Arabic speakers.

Interest in the Arabic language and Arab studies has risen dramatically following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Enrollment in Arabic courses at many American universities has more than doubled during the past two years; interest in Arabic-focused study abroad programs has also increased.

A deep and abiding interest in the Arabic language and Arab culture will be the single most useful tool in overcoming the inevitable challenges of learning a language such as Arabic. Not everyone who studies Arabic will make a career out of it. Whether you see Arabic as an intellectual challenge, a means to connect with your heritage, a door to a new and unknown world, or a key to a career path, we hope you will also see it as an invaluable tool for intercultural communication and understanding.

FAQ for Arabic students

This section includes responses to typical questions about Arabic and language learning.

1. Getting started with Arabic

- 1.1 How and where should I begin to study Arabic?
- 1.2 What books will I need?
- 1.3 Should I get a native speaker as a tutor?
- 1.4 I want to learn some Arabic, but I do not plan to reach an advanced

level. Is it worth my time just to take a course or two?

2. Arabic in the language classroom

- 2.1 Is language learning like other classroom learning?
- 2.2 What strategies do good language learners employ?
- 2.3 My teacher's style does not match mine. What should I do?
- 2.4 Why are other students progressing more quickly than I am?
- 2.5 What are reasonable expectations for proficiency and progress?

3. About Arabic

- 3.1 Is Arabic harder than other languages?
- 3.2 Is Arabic related to other languages?
- 3.3 What is the root system?
- 3.4 What are the differences between colloquial dialects and MSA?
- 3.5 What is diglossia?
- 3.6 Will studying Arabic help me learn other languages?

4. Learning goals and strategies

- 4.1 Should I focus on reading comprehension or on listening and speaking?
- 4.2 Should I study MSA or a dialect?
- 4.3 Which dialect should I study?
- 4.4 I'm having trouble learning vocabulary. What are some effective strategies?
- 4.5 How much should I study a day?
- 4.6 What are common pitfalls for Arabic students?

5. Arabic and the Arab world

- 5.1 How important is knowledge about Arab culture for me in learning Arabic?
- 5.2 I want to get to know native speakers of Arabic. Any suggestions?
- 5.3 I want to read more about Middle Eastern history, literature, or politics. Where should I start?
- 5.4 How important is it for me to study in the Arab world?

1. Getting started with Arabic

1.1 How and where should I begin to study Arabic?

There is no one “best” way or place to study Arabic. Your goals will determine what is best for you. For example, you should have some idea about the variety of Arabic—classical, MSA, or colloquial—that you are interested in studying (see question [4.2](#)). You should choose a program that matches your goals.

The most common way to study Arabic is in a classroom setting. Generally you will make the greatest progress under the guidance of an experienced teacher. If you are not currently enrolled in a college or university and would like to pursue the study of Arabic, ask at local institutions about the possibility of taking classes. Some may even offer evening courses. In major cities, Arab community centers often offer Arabic courses (although they may focus on the formal Arabic used in the Qur’an and other religious contexts).

Students who aim at achieving a high level of proficiency in Arabic generally plan to travel or study in the Middle East. We encourage those who have the opportunity to take advantage of travel or study abroad programs. In most cases, the ability to “soak up” the language by living in the Middle East is increased with the help of a structured program. ([International Study Programs](#))

1.2 What books will I need?

There are several Arabic textbook series that are used in the United States today. Among these are (listed in alphabetical order by the last name of author):

- *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic and Intermediate MSA* by Abboud et al. from Cambridge University Press (<http://titles.cambridge.org/catalogue.asp?isbn=0521272955>) and the University of Michigan Press (<http://www.press.umich.edu/titles/59016.html>)
- *Ahlan wa Sahlan* by Mahdi Alish from Yale University Press (<http://www.yale.edu/yup/books/058543.htm>)
- *Al-Kitaab fii Tacallum Al-cArabiyya* series by Brustad et al. published by Georgetown University Press (<http://press.georgetown.edu/arabic.html>)
- *Standard Arabic: An Advanced Course* by Dickins and Watson from Cambridge University Press (<http://titles.cambridge.org/catalogue.asp?isbn=0521635586>)
- *Elementary and Intermediate Arabic* by Munther Younes from Yale University Press (<http://www.yale.edu/yup/books/072406.htm>)

All of these textbooks incorporate a full range of language skills exercises and

activities and include audiovisual components.

- An important tool is a **good dictionary**, such as the *Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. The *Oxford English-Arabic Dictionary* may come in handy. You may also wish to buy a dictionary for the colloquial dialect you are studying.

These texts should be enough to get you off to a good start, and all of them can be readily found in bookstores or online.

1.3 Should I get a native speaker as a tutor?

As the saying goes, “having teeth doesn’t make you a dentist.” As is generally true of native speakers of English, most native speakers of Arabic aren’t great at explaining their language. Good tutors are few and far between. Shop around, and try different tutors out if you can. Find someone who strikes you as a flexible personality who will be easy to work with. It helps if you like them, and if they can be something of a role model for functioning in Arabic. Find someone whose pronunciation strikes you as clear. An educated person will generally be a better bet, but only to a point. Find someone who will create opportunities for you to speak and stay away from someone who does most of the speaking. A few like to lecture on the glories of the Arabic language (its logic, beauty, precision . . .). Avoid these types when looking for a tutor. You want someone who is practical, will work with you and create opportunities for you to use the language.

Most importantly, find someone who’ll cut to the quick and give you just what you need. A good tutor will be able to quickly assess your personal level of Arabic, listen to and understand your goals, and help you get to where you want to be, rather than simply applying a preconceived notion of how Arabic should be taught that supposedly fits “one and all.”

1.4 I want to learn some Arabic, but I do not plan to reach an advanced level. Is it worth my time just to take a course or two?

The answer is an emphatic YES. Even if you have an hour or less a day to devote to Arabic you can still learn a great deal in only a few months. You can learn the script (alphabet) and can basic conversation skills very quickly. Most important, you will get exposure to cultural issues that have great relevance in our world. Studying a language for *any* period of time is an investment worthy of your time and effort.

2. Arabic in the language classroom

2.1 Is learning a language just like other classroom learning?

Learning a language is quite different from most classroom experiences both in the way a typical classroom operates and in the behaviors a student should adopt to attain their goals. In a traditional classroom setting, professors lecture and students listen or take notes; a language-learning environment should be dynamic and student-centered. The teacher should help foster this kind of environment, but the student is also responsible to participate actively and contribute to the classroom dynamic. Your success in a language class will depend very much on each individual's active participation and in the class. Frequent absence or lack of preparation will inhibit your progress in the class. (If you feel that language learning is not intuitive for you, read carefully the comments under question [2.2](#) for ideas on how to improve your language learning abilities.)

Learning a language involves apparently contradictory methods. For example, there is a great deal that is purely formulaic: vocabulary lists, verb conjugations, noun declensions, and grammar rules. But there is also part which is creative and unique: poetry, jokes, nuances, and culture-specific references. Ambiguities, idioms, and exceptions to the rule are as important as vocabulary and verb conjugation charts. Competence in a language also requires cultural understanding and sensitivity, as well as the ability to take risks and feel comfortable with a new language “persona.”

Few other learning experiences require such a combination of logic, rigor, and creativity. Learning a foreign language can be one of life's most challenging, stimulating, and satisfying experiences.

2.2 What strategies do good language learners employ?

Some students inevitably find that they aren't “on top” when it comes to learning a foreign language. Just as some will claim that they aren't “cut out” for learning math, a few students believe that learning a foreign language is beyond their capacities. Those thoughts are counterproductive. Different levels of talent, inclination, and discipline will affect your progress in language learning—as in any field. Even so, there are some strategies students can take to improve their ability to learn a foreign language. Here are some typical strategies and characteristics of good language learners:

- **Speak your language: Be an active learner in the classroom and maximize your exposure to the language.** Even if your teacher does not have an “Arabic

only” rule in class, you should use Arabic as much as possible. Ask questions, chat with your classmates, and participate whenever possible *in Arabic*. You may not feel like you know much, but by using what you do know, you will add to that knowledge. Try to encounter Arabic whenever possible. Put up vocabulary cards around your house or apartment. Listen to an Arabic news update once a day on the Internet. When you study vocabulary words, listen to them on tape/CD (preferably in context) and repeat them out loud. Use new vocabulary in sentences and write the words down. Get to know Arabic speakers and try to speak Arabic with them as much as possible.

- **Be persistent and creative.** Persistence pays: One professor learned Arabic by painstakingly working through each exercise until he felt confident and understood it. Take each assigned text or exercise as a challenge: a puzzle to solve. Language learning requires hard work, but it does not have to be a burden. Approach your learning experience with a playful attitude. For example, use rhymes or songs to learn new words or expressions. Play games to conjugate verbs or to memorize vocabulary lists. Such games and activities will help new concepts “stick” in your mind.
- **Have a positive work ethic.** Learning a language is hard, and requires a strong work ethic. Even so, you will be surprised how much improvement you can make when you concentrate and just keep trying. Dedicate time to your studies, and use that time wisely. You must be willing to work hard and constantly improve your work ethic and more efficient study habits.
- **Be a team player** in the classroom and learn by doing, by “teaching,” and by listening. Many language teachers assign small group work both in and out of the classroom. Group work not only adds variety to the class but also allows students to learn by doing. Studies show that any speaking practice is extremely helpful, even with students at beginning. You do not have to speak Arabic with a native to learn. Also, you should recognize from the beginning that students have different learning styles. Some students cannot wait to jump in to the language, while others prefer to watch from the bank or wade in the shallows until they feel comfortable. If you are too loud and outspoken, you may step on others’ chances to learn. Develop patience with the teacher, your classmates, and yourself, and have an anxious desire to master material and move yourself forward. Be considerate of others and stay mentally engaged.
- **Do not neglect your weaknesses.** Students have a natural tendency to gravitate toward that which seems easy and avoid that which is hard. Effective language learners must overcome that tendency. For example, a graduate student who studied Arabic without speaking or listening in class struggled in a study abroad program. Even though she was bilingual in French and English, she felt she did

not have the facility for oral/aural comprehension. She went through the motions of listening to tapes, but she had given up on developing listening or speaking skills. Instead of pushing herself, she devoted herself to those areas in which she excelled, such as grammar and vocabulary. A teacher recognized what she was doing and helped her overcome her weaknesses. Without focusing on her weaknesses, she may never have developed listening comprehension skills or have overcome her fear of speaking or hearing Arabic. A good student must acknowledge their weaknesses and work to overcome them.

- **Do not be afraid of mistakes.** Good language learners are unafraid to make mistakes. They are willing to try, and should appreciate correction from others. An enthusiastic attitude in a language class will help you progress in your Arabic study.
- **Learn from your mistakes.** Good language learners learn from their mistakes and those of their classmates. They listen to others and focus on how to avoid repeating previous mistakes. Listen to other students in class, identify their mistakes, and correct them in your head. You will improve dramatically as you pay attention to those around you.
- **Be comfortable with ambiguity.** Good language learners are comfortable even when they do not understand everything they hear or read for the first time. Focus on the overall meaning and avoid getting “hung-up” on one word.

Good language learners come from all kinds of backgrounds and with a whole variety of styles, preferences, and abilities. Not all good language learners are “naturally gifted.” They simply adopt effective attitudes and strategies, and they keep at it. None of us can afford to rely on talent alone. **Hard work, an enthusiastic attitude, and time-tested strategies are the best formula for success in language acquisition.**

2.3 My teacher’s style doesn’t match mine. What should I do?

No one teacher’s style will be ideal for every student in the class. Expect your teacher to have strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps your teacher is a native speaker of Arabic but has a hard time answering questions about grammar. Other teachers may have a talent for explaining difficult concepts but do not have native conversation abilities. **Students should not let a teacher’s weaknesses limit how much they will learn. Instead of blaming the teacher for their lack of progress, students can determine the course and rate of their own progress.** A teacher is only a guide and resource. Ultimately students should take responsibility for what they learn.

If you do struggle with a teacher's style or methodology, before you give in to frustration you should express your concerns to your teacher. You may be surprised at the results. Good teachers want to improve and are eager for student feedback. In those rare cases where a teacher is hindering students from reaching their goals and is unwilling to accommodate requests for change, those students should consider changing classes and discussing the problem with a program administrator.

2.4 Why are other students progressing more quickly than I am?

Learning any new language will be difficult. Arabic is no exception. It is natural to feel uncomfortable when you do not understand a question when you make mistakes. Sometimes you may think that other students are progressing faster than you. Do not get discouraged! Many students in language classrooms feel that while "I" am struggling, everyone else is doing well. Occasionally that may be true, but most often those students simply feel the natural fears and insecurities of language learning.

If you learned some Arabic growing up you will have some advantages over classmates who had no previous experience. But, that does not mean you can coast, especially if you are studying Classical or Modern Standard Arabic. Formal Arabic differs from the spoken dialects in vocabulary and grammar. You will have to learn the differences between colloquial and formal Arabic.

Similarly, if you are a non-heritage learner, do not be intimidated by students who are already proficient in spoken Arabic. The material they already know is not always useful for learning formal Arabic, and some of it is positively unhelpful. Arabic teachers have learned that students who practice good language-learning techniques will do regardless of previous experience.

Some students ask: what should I do if I feel that other students are holding me back? If you are a strong language learner who catches on quickly, do not detract from the rest of the class. Assist other students and be patient with the speed of the class. Your teacher will greatly appreciate the help, and you will actually increase your own abilities. Help contribute to an encouraging environment where all students are unafraid to try or make mistakes. Apply good learning strategies to adopt and improve your performance (see [2.2](#)).

2.5 What are reasonable expectations for proficiency and progress?

Language proficiency is typically measured by how students or users of the language perform in a variety of situations and tasks. Less proficient speakers will be able to perform limited tasks with limited fluency. More proficient speakers exhibit fluency,

precision, and general cultural awareness, and are able to communicate effectively about both concrete and abstract topics. (Click [here](#) to see a page that compares two common proficiency scales with brief definitions of the proficiency levels. For a more in-depth description of these levels according to the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) scale, click [here](#).

There will be a range of proficiency achieved by students of Arabic. After 1 year (2 semesters) of Arabic study, most students will have achieved a “Novice High” to “Intermediate Low” level (on the ACTFL scale) depending on the number of contact (class) hours per week. After 2 years, most students exhibit “Intermediate Low” to “Intermediate Mid” proficiency. The steps between the proficiency levels require progressively more time to move up, so achieving “Intermediate High” proficiency is a reasonable goal for 3 or 4 years of study at a university program that offers 4-5 contact hours of Arabic per week. A few students may reach the Advanced level in the same amount of time.

3. About Arabic

3.1 Is Arabic harder than other languages?

To say that learning Arabic is no “harder” for native English speakers than learning Spanish would probably be false advertising. In a common scale that groups languages according to the number of contact hours required to achieve advanced proficiency, Arabic falls in category 4 (together with Chinese Korean, Japanese, and Hindi), which is the highest level. This means that it takes longer to acquire the same level of proficiency in Arabic than it would in Spanish or French.

Arabic is relatively difficult because it requires learning a new script, new consonant sounds, and a different syntax, as well an extensive vocabulary with few cognates. Inevitably, Arabic courses will be among the most difficult some students will ever take. This probably has as much to do with the nature of language learning as it does with Arabic—some students would likely find the study of any language challenging.

Despite its difficulty, Arabic is not the exclusive realm of “elite” students or the linguistically gifted. Arabic is absolutely “doable” and can be an enjoyable challenge for any student. Even students with average native talent can be very successful in learning Arabic; and even gifted students run into frustrations. Stubborn perseverance and dedicated study are more important than does “catching on” quickly to a new language. Do not be afraid of Arabic’s reputation. Have confidence in your ability to learn Arabic and to learn it well. Many Americans have reached Superior level proficiency in Arabic and you too should expect to be one of them very soon

inshaa'allah.

3.2 Is Arabic related to other languages?

Arabic belongs to the Semitic family of languages. Currently spoken languages from this family, besides Arabic, include Modern Hebrew, Amharic, Tigre, Tigrinya, Syriac, a few Aramaic dialects, and Maltese. Ancestral languages in this family include Biblical Hebrew, Syriac, and Akkadian. The Arabic script, however, is used by several modern languages—Persian, Pashto, and Dari, for example—not from the Semitic language family (see question [3.6](#)).

3.3 What is the root system?

One of the characteristic features of Semitic languages is their system of roots and patterns. Most (but not all) Arabic words have trilateral roots—in other words, there are three consonant letters in these words that connect them to a “root” meaning and to other words that share the same root. In Arabic, you can manipulate roots by varying the internal (short) vowel between the root letters, by adding suffixes and prefixes, or placing other consonants and long vowels between the root letters. These changes give derived meanings that are often (though not always) related in predictable ways to the root meaning.

[The root word **s-l-m** is a common example. From the basic verb *salima*, “to be safe,” we can derive other verbs such as *sallama*, “to hand over or deliver;” *aslama*, “to submit;” and *istaslama*, “to surrender.” The nouns *salaam*, “peace;” *salaama*, “health or safety;” and *muslim*, “a Muslim,” derive from the same roots. Most Arabic-English dictionaries, such as the *Hans Wehr Arabic-English Dictionary*, will list their entries in root order.] (**See point 3)

The whole idea of roots and patterns may be quite foreign to someone who grew up speaking a Western language. The patterns that guide the manipulation of Arabic roots will not be the bane of your existence. On the contrary, they are methodical and predictable patterns that, once mastered, will help you understand and produce the language. Learning the root and pattern system early in your study of Arabic—and reviewing it often—is an investment that will pay high dividends in the future. The root system is among the most fascinating aspects of the language.

3.4 What are the differences between MSA and the colloquial dialects of Arabic?

The differences between MSA and the colloquial dialects of Arabic are deeper than

the differences between formal speech and slang in English. Formal and colloquial Arabic have different phonology, grammar, and vocabulary. Each dialect relates to the Formal in different ways. Arabs from various regions of the Arab world may claim that their dialect is the closest to classical Arabic (*fuSHa at-turaath*) because each group is proud of their language. In fact, understanding classical Arabic or MSA alone will not make you a proficient speaker in any dialect. At the same time, MSA is a *lingua franca* that most Arabs will understand. It will be useful for more formal tasks (such as reading a newspaper or listening to a news broadcast) throughout the Arab world.

3.5 What is **diglossia**?

Diglossia is a linguistic phenomenon in which two distinct forms or registers of a language are present and actively used in a society. One of these registers is generally associated with formal and written contexts while the other is used in informal, everyday situations. A number of world languages present diglossia, including Arabic, Greek, Haitian Creole, and Swiss German. Diglossia in Arabic is the technical term for the presence of both MSA and the colloquial dialects of Arabic in the Arab world.

For more information on Arabic diglossia, see this [article](#) by Andy Freeman:

3.6 **Will studying Arabic help me learn other languages?**

Arabic can definitely help you learn other languages, especially other Semitic languages. With the spread of the Islamic empire, Arabic effectively replaced other Semitic languages in all areas of life. In other areas conquered by the Arabs, Arabic became the language of the ruling class, while non-Semitic languages survived and even prospered. In many cases, the older script of that language was replaced by an Arabic script. As a result, modern languages such as Persian, Pashto, Dari, Urdu, and others use what is essentially a modified Arabic script. If you study these languages after Arabic, your previous experience with the script will help you significantly, and you may be surprised by the number of words in those languages derived from Arabic. Learning Arabic can also make learning languages more closely related to English seem easier by comparison. Spanish, French, or German are not quite as intimidating after wrestling with a language like Arabic.

4. Learning goals and strategies

4.1 Should I focus on reading comprehension skills, or on listening and speaking?

When studying Arabic, you should have a balanced approach that allows you to gain familiarity and expertise in both comprehension and production. Practical constraints may limit your opportunities. If your goal is to get to know Arabs, especially in their own countries, speaking and listening should be a high priority. If your goal is to read literature, scholarly books, or newspaper articles, you should focus on reading comprehension (translation is often considered a skill of its own). Be careful not to focus on only one aspect of language learning. Diversify your skills by addressing all aspects of a language. Competence and experience in one facet of language will improve your ability in other areas.

4.2 Should I study Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or a dialect (*‘aammiyya*)?

The simplest answer is both. To become fluent in Arabic, you need to develop proficiency in MSA and at least one dialect. As we have already mentioned, MSA is the language of education and culture and of formal discourse. Almost everything you read will be in MSA. The colloquial dialects are used for the majority of everyday conversation. These dialects are also the medium of pop culture in the Arab world. Most students will not want to limit their ability to connect with Arabs and authentic Arabic texts to only one of these linguistic “worlds.” Unless your goals are strictly limited to one or the other, we recommend you equip yourself to encounter both colloquial and Modern Standard Arabic.

Unless otherwise specified, any Arabic class at an American university will most likely focus on MSA. For both philosophical and practical reasons, many universities do not offer courses in Arabic dialects. On a philosophical level, some teachers feel that colloquial dialects are the “poor cousins” of the more distinguished standard written language, and are therefore not worthwhile to teach in the classroom. On a practical level, some universities that might like to offer classes in a colloquial dialect may not have the human or material resources to do so. There are relatively few people who can speak the language that Arabs actually speak. Learning MSA is essential to your study of Arabic. Even so, do not disregard the colloquial dialects; they will let you speak with Arabs.

Despite the reputation that dialects are less important, research has shown that students perform best on Arabic proficiency examinations when they study both MSA and a dialect. Perhaps this is because the various dialects are more accessible to the

beginner, or because they often simplify the rigorous grammar of MSA. Whatever the reason, it is a good idea to study *‘aammiyya* as a basic component of Arabic.

4.3 Which dialect should I study?

The choice of which dialect of *‘aammiyya* to study depends on your personal preference and the availability of teachers, tutors, and textbooks. The Egyptian dialect is the most widely-spoken among Arabs. Until recently almost all Arabic films were produced in Egypt (in the Egyptian dialect). Egyptian is a good option because of the availability of learning resources. The Levantine dialect is widely used and understood, and is also an excellent choice. Syria produces a growing number of television programs and media in the Levantine dialect. The Maghrib or Gulf dialects are an excellent choice for those planning travel, research, or a career in those areas. If you intend to specialize in an area of the Arab world, you should focus on that region’s dialect.

4.4 I’m having trouble **learning vocabulary**. What are some effective strategies?

Building vocabulary often frustrates students who study Arabic after learning a Western European language. Arabic vocabulary is not easy, especially for beginning students, but it is crucial to communication. Here are a few suggestions to help you build a better vocabulary in Arabic. Try various strategies and find one (or many) that works for you.

- **First of all, become comfortable with the script and the root system.** Focus your effort. A solid foundation will aid in the retention of new words.
- **Do not rely on cognate association.** English-speaking students quickly realize that Arabic has very few English cognates. You cannot depend on an Arabic word sounding similar to an equivalent English word.
- **Listen to (and repeat) new words.** Hearing new words spoken on tape/CD can be an excellent prompt for your memory, and can help to improve your pronunciation. While you listen, try to visualize how each word is written in Arabic script, remember what it means, and mimic the pronunciation of the speaker. If a tape/CD is not available for the vocabulary lists in your textbook, ask your teacher or a native Arabic speaker to slowly and clearly record them for you.
- **Flashcards** are neither high-tech nor novel, but they do the job. Write the words down on both sides of cards and practice going from Arabic to English and English to Arabic. Work with a classmate when possible; otherwise, use the

flashcards to review while walking or eating.

- **Memorize new vocabulary words “in context.”** Memorize (or create your own) model sentences containing the word. If the vocabulary comes from an Arabic text, try to remember how it was used in that text.
- **Use Mnemonic devices to remember words.** If you cannot seem to remember a word, find some connection—however nonlinear—with English sounds or words. Often the more creative (or silly), the better! For example, if remembering that a *jariida* (جريدة) is something that you “read” helps you remember it is a newspaper, make use of this mnemonic device.
- Most importantly, **use the words.** Make it a point to incorporate new words into compositions or conversation as often as possible. If you do not use it, you will lose it!

4.5 How much should I study each day?

Language learning is time-intensive. Most university courses in Arabic will expect you to study at least one hour a day outside the classroom, and more likely two. Some students will find they need to spend more than two hours a day—above and beyond any time in the classroom—to keep pace. Naturally, there is a limit to how much one can profitably accomplish in one sitting or in one day. The *quality* of time you spend on Arabic is more important than the *quantity* of the time.

Often, students who find that the language does not come easily to them will study in unproductive ways. Some students will work on Arabic for hours on end with little gain. This can be frustrating and humiliating, particularly when the language appears to come so easily to others. Learn to recognize the difference between “healthy” and unhealthy levels of frustration. Your mind gets tired just like your body; so do not attempt marathon study sessions. Expect Arabic to challenge you, and rise to the challenge by working with focus and determination. Do not expect to get to the top of the Arabic mountain in one day (week, year, etc.). Enjoy the privilege and challenge of studying Arabic.

It is particularly ineffective to try to “cram” to learn a language. If success on a final exam is your only goal, then that, sadly, will likely be your only benefit from the class. Regular, consistent study is the best—and probably only—way to learn a language well. Not only will you perform well in class and learn something about the language, you will also develop sound study habits that will carry over into other areas. Many students have noted that the rigor of learning Arabic helped them develop a personal discipline that benefited them even if they did not pursue an Arabic-related career.

4.6 Tell me about some pitfalls to avoid.

- **Frustration.** Frustration is part of learning a language. Early on in the process of learning Arabic, students should prepare for the normal feelings of frustration. Each of us has different talents and challenges, but when it comes to language learning, all of us feel some frustration. Remember, frustration is not all bad: it promotes growth and builds strength.
- **Unreasonable Expectations.** Many students have unreasonable expectations about the rate of progress in reading and listening comprehension, vocabulary assimilation, and, achieving “fluency.” Mastering Arabic is a lifelong endeavor. If you focus only on how far you have to go, it will inevitably be very discouraging. Recognize the progress you have made. In fact, you can learn a lot in one semester or term. We cannot emphasize that enough. It is all a question of attitude. Some students feel that Arabic is a perilous mountain with crags and precipices awaiting the faint of heart. Looking only up at the mountain can be discouraging. Stay focused on the big picture, and climb the mountain one step at a time.
- **Do not worry about short vowels.** Get used to reading and writing Arabic from the start without the diacritics that are used to indicate short vowels. Writing these is unnatural for Arabs, and should be so for you as well. Short vowel markings are typically only used for children’s books and religious texts. Even though you will not read them, learn them and how they work. Like all other aspects of the language, your control of short vowels will increase gradually as your overall proficiency in the language expands.

5. Arabic and the Arab world

5.1 How important is learning about Arab culture for me in learning Arabic?

You cannot study a language without understanding the culture that speaks it. Language and culture are intertwined. Cultural competence is one of the areas of language competence. To emulate the proficiency model of the educated native speaker, you must understand religion, history, politics, and any other subjects about which an educated person might discuss in a social situation. You do not need a mastery of these subjects, but some knowledge and a good deal of curiosity.

Gain all the knowledge you can about the culture and history of the Arab world. You must have background knowledge in order to follow any discussion. No matter how

good your language skills, you will have a difficult time following a discussion about political matters if you know nothing of the history and politics of the region. Develop a healthy fascination for all these topics. It will make you a better language learner. Those who follow current affairs already know that the Middle East is constantly in the media spotlight. Try to stay abreast of important events, and explore what the Arabic press has to say about the same issues.

5.2 I want to get to know native speakers of Arabic. Any suggestions?

Getting to know native speakers of Arabic is an excellent way to practice the language and be exposed to Arab culture. Many universities have Arab-American student associations or Arabic language clubs. These might be a good place to start if you are a university student. Most large cities in the United States will have an Arab community center and some may offer language, art, or culture classes.

When you are with speakers of Arabic, don't be afraid to try out your Arabic. Arabs and others will be highly impressed that you're learning their language. They are also likely to be patient and forgiving of your mistakes.

5.3 I want to read more about the peoples and cultures of the Arab world to help me contextualize my study of the language. Where should I start?

The number of titles on the Arab world is immense and growing rapidly. You may wish to consult a teacher or standard reference books for ideas on where to start. The list below offers a sampling of titles but is by no means comprehensive. Nor is it the only one. (For example, click [here](#) to see a required reading list for Georgetown's master's program in Arab studies.)

- **History**

Cleveland, William L. *A History of the Modern Middle East*.

Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples*.

Hoyland, Robert G. *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*.

Menocal, Maria Rosa. *The Ornament of the World*.

Maalouf, Amin. *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*.

Newby, Gordon. *A History of the Jews of Arabia*.

- **Literature and Literary studies**

Allen, Roger. *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*.

Bushnaq, Inea. *Arab Folktales*.

Cambridge History of Arabic Literature, Volume I & II.

Huddawy, Husain. *Arabian Nights: The Thousand and One Nights*.

Johnson-Davies, Denys. *Under the Naked Sky: Short Stories from the Arab World*.

Mahfouz, Naguib. *The Cairo Trilogy: Palace Walk, Palace of Desire, Sugar Street*.

Nicholson, R. *A Literary History of the Arabs*.

- **Cultures in the Arab World**

Bates, Daniel and Amal Rassam. *Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East*.

Bengio and Ben-Dor, eds. *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*.

Courberge, Youssef. *Christians and Jews Under Islam*.

Hourani, Albert H. *Minorities in the Arab World*.

Kragg, Kenneth. *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East*.

Stillman, Norman. *Jews of Arab Lands*.

- **Islam and the Qur'an**

Armstrong, Karen. *Islam*.

Cook, Michael. *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*.

Esposito, John. *Islam: The Straight Path*.

Haddad, Yvonne Y. *Contemporary Islam and the Challenge of History*.

Halm, Heinz. *Shi'a Islam*.

Khalidi, Tarif. *Classical Arab Islam*.

Williams, John A. *The Word of Islam*.

Yusuf Ali, Abdullah. *The Quran Translation*.

- **Political Science and Cultural Studies**

Antonius, George. *Arab Awakening: the Story of the Arab National Movement*.

Freedman, Robert O. *The Middle East and the Peace Process*.

Friedman, Thomas. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*.

Shaheen, Jack. *Reel Bad Arabs*.

Smith, Charles C. *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*.

- **Women in the Arab World**

Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*.

— *A Border Passage*.

Al-Radi, Nuha. *Baghdad Diaries*.

El-Saadawi, Nawal. *The Nawal El-Saadawi Reader*.

Kandiyoti, Deniz, ed. *Women, Islam, and the State*.

—, ed. *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*.

Mernissi, Fatima. *Beyond The Veil: Male-Female Dynamics In Modern Muslim Society*.

Sharawi, Huda (trans. Margot Badran). *Harem Years: The Memoirs Of An Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)*.

- **Arabic Language**

Brustad, Kristen. *The Syntax of Spoken Arabic*.

Elgibali, Ala'. *Understanding Arabic*.

Holes, Clive. *Modern Arabic*.

Versteegh, Kees. *The Arabic Language*.

- **Learning Materials**

Al-Warraki, Nariman and Ahmad Taher Hassanein. *The Connectors in Modern Standard Arabic*.

Scheindlin, Raymon. *201 Arabic Verbs*.

5.4 How important is it for me to study in the Arab world?

Students who aim at achieving a high level of proficiency with Arabic generally plan to travel or study in the Middle East. If you have the chance, take advantage of travel or study abroad programs. In most cases, you will better “soak up” the language by living in the Middle East in a structured program.

Section III: Resources for students of Arabic

Study Abroad programs

(Under Construction... more information to come soon)

Web-based resources

- Middle East Studies

[Middle East Studies Association](#)

[University of Utah Middle East Library Links](#)

[Middle East Network Information Center](#)

[Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies – University of Michigan](#)

- Entertainment

[Articles on Music, Dancing, and Culture](#)

[Arabic Radio, TV Directories](#)

- News/media

[Asharq Al-Awsat \(Arabic\)](#)

[Sahafa Online \(English\)](#)

[Al-Jazeera Net \(Arabic\) \(English\)](#)

[Ajeeb \(Arabic\)](#)

[Dar Al-Hayat \(Arabic\)](#)

[Arabic Media Internet Network \(English/Arabic\)](#)

- Employment / Learning Resources

[Online Courses for Arabic](#)

Taught by TAFL specialists

[The American Association of Teachers of Arabic](#)

Information on everything from Universities and Study Abroad to Employment and Funding

[Maktoob: Arabic Information Page](#)

- Other

[100 Questions & Answers about Arab Americans: A Journalist's Guide](#)
[Arabic Search Engine](#)