

Critical Language Awareness in Arabic Language Teaching: Five Modules for Professional Development © 2024 by Saurav Goswami, Esha Mukherjee, Rima Elabdali, Hina Ashraf, & Lourdes Ortega, at Georgetown University's Initiative for Multilingual Studies with funding from Qatar Foundation International, is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](#).

Note on how to use this module: We have designed this teacher development module for an audience of teachers of Arabic working with k-12 students (any context, any level). The module can be completed in 1.5 hours. You will find 5 modules like this one. Each can be used alone. If you want to use them all, we have numbered them 1 through 5 to suggest a beneficial sequence. We'd love your feedback! Just email us at lourdes.ortega@georgetown.edu.

Module 2

Reflecting on the diversity of student backgrounds in Arabic language classrooms

Goal: Teachers will discuss and reflect on the importance of knowing student backgrounds in their Arabic classrooms.

Introduction for Workshop Leader

In teaching Arabic, teachers often find that no two classes are the same. Students come from different backgrounds and bring diverse perspectives to the classroom. For example, students with different gender expressions, or those from different socioeconomic backgrounds can shape each classroom differently. In every Arabic classroom, we will find students who fit into a few profiles. Some might know the Arabic script, but not how to speak it. Others might have some knowledge of religious Arabic, while others might have none of the above. What kind of assets/strengths might students from these backgrounds bring into the classroom?

Prototypical student backgrounds:

	Student profile	What can they bring to the classroom?
1	Alphabet-familiar students	Knowledge of the script; familiarity with Islam
2	Students from Muslim background	May have knowledge of script, familiarity with Islam and sounds of Arabic
3	Students who have lived in an Arab country	Knowledge of a regional variety; some knowledge of formal Arabic; familiarity with Arab culture; may have familiarity with Islam or other religion from Arab world
4	Students from Arabic-speaking background	Knowledge of a regional variety; familiarity with Arab culture; may have familiarity with Islam or other religion from Arab world
5	Learning Arabic for the first time	No prior knowledge of Arabic script or Arab culture; may bring enthusiasm for learning a new language and culture

At the end of the workshop, distribute this table to the participants with an added column asking them to fill in their ideas on how to make most of the assets from each student profile.

Please note that the module ends with an *Exit Ticket*, which is a reflective activity that teachers will individually fill out and submit to the workshop leader. The exit ticket should be handed out to participants as the last workshop activity.

For Participants

Warm-up in Small Groups

Which kinds of students do you teach in your classroom? For each statement in the first column, how many assets does a student bring if that statement is true of them? Check all that apply.

	Cultural	Religious	Linguistic	Script	Family
1. They can read a little bit of the Quran.					
2. They hear a dialect at home.					
3. They use a dialect at home.					
4. Both parents are Arabic speakers					
5. Only one parent is an Arabic speaker.					
6. No parent or family member speaks Arabic.					
7. At home they are English-speaking and have no cultural or religious connection to Arabic.					
8. They are Muslim.					
9. They went to an Arabic-medium school in the Arab world.					
10. They went to an English-medium					

school in the Arab world.					
11. They speak languages that have some words similar to Arabic such as Hindi or Turkish.					
12. They speak languages that have words similar to Arabic and use the Arabic script, such as Urdu or Farsi.					
13. Their parents want them to learn Arabic.					
14. They love to learn difficult languages.					

After completing the table, compare your checks with other teachers. Discuss this question: *How can different student profiles, with different assets, influence your teaching?*

Part 1: Read and reflect

In the scenarios below, you will read about the experiences of real teachers of Arabic, and how they work with the different backgrounds of students in their classrooms. Choose 2 teachers to read. As you read each scenario, think about the following questions:

- How does each teacher report on their students’ backgrounds? Underline the relevant parts in the text.
- What methods does each teacher use to manage the diversity in their students’ backgrounds? Circle the relevant parts in the text.

Teacher 1: Faris

Faris grew up in Syria and emigrated to the United States right after college. He has been teaching Arabic for 17 years at a public school in a big city in the Midwest at middle and high levels. Around 99% of his students have no prior knowledge of Arabic. Faris and his colleagues have developed specific strategies to teach Arabic to students learning it for the first time,

“Because our students are all learning Arabic for the first time, for all levels, I compare Arabic varieties to the different kinds of English in the US, so they can see that all languages have variation. The modules that I design focus on introducing Arab culture, music, cuisine, art and clothing from different countries of the Arab world. We also connect them to children from schools in Arabic-speaking countries for practicing conversation. I also don’t encourage English in class, so that the students will be exposed to Arabic a lot. I know that most of the students will choose to study abroad, which is why conversational Arabic is my priority.”

Teacher 2: Charlotte

Charlotte is an Arabic teacher who started learning the language when she was in college, and she is familiar with the Levantine dialect. She teaches at a public high school in a small city in the Midwest which has newly begun offering Arabic as a Foreign Language. Her classroom consists of a mix of students who are learning Arabic for the first time (whom she calls new learners), as well as students who hear or speak some Arabic at home (whom she calls heritage speakers). This is how Charlotte’s method of managing Arabic variation and class diversity has changed over time:

“I originally used to think, ‘Oh, it’d be so helpful for the heritage speakers to help the new learners!’ But that’s not really what happens. Over time I’ve found out that teaching heritage speakers and new learners together demotivates the new learners because they have no knowledge of any Arabic at all. At least in the beginning. Doing this might also bore the heritage speakers, who already have some knowledge of Arabic from home, because of reading the Quran. It’s been much better ever since we’ve separated them at the beginner level, so that they have the time to play with the language, make mistakes and feel comfortable with Arabic. Later, once the basics are taken care of, I bring them together. I also think it is important to maintain a calm approach with new learners, creating a safe space for them. Especially in the beginning, I also let all students ask me questions in English. I don’t force them, so that they feel comfortable with me and one another.”

Teacher 3: Heba

Heba grew up in Kuwait and emigrated to the United States right after college. She teaches middle school at a public school in the South. Heba teaches students from diverse backgrounds. This is how she navigates her varied student cohort:

“I have lots of different students, some have knowledge of a dialect, and some are learning Arabic for the first time. I also have a lot of students who speak different languages at home, like Hindi, Urdu, and Afghan languages. So, I also take advantage of cognates in teaching Arabic as a second language. I use cognates from Urdu, Hindi, Afghan languages to teach Arabic (*dukaan*, *murabba*, etc.). It helps my students to learn new vocabulary, by making connections between Arabic and languages they already know.”

Teacher 4: Peter

Peter is an Arabic teacher who started learning the language when he was in college. He teaches middle school at a private school in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, where Arabic is offered as an additional language. In his school, students spend several years learning Latin and Greek. This is how Peter modifies his class to his students’ preferred learning style:

“I found that a lot of my students, especially at the higher levels, were wanting to learn a lot of grammar. Maybe that’s because I teach at a school where students are taught Latin and Greek for several years using a grammar-centric method. So that’s how they’re used to conceptualizing language learning. So this year I’ve been trying to not just focus on grammar, but presenting students with a lot of grammar. And I think the students have enjoyed it, and I try to give them those grammar concepts, have them practice them, and give them opportunities where they can use the language communicatively in terms of composition and stuff like that.”

Teacher 5: Jessica

Jessica is a teacher of Arabic who started learning the language when she was in college. She teaches middle school at a public school in the Northeast of the United States, where Arabic is an elective course offering. Jessica teaches students from diverse backgrounds. This is how Katie attends to her diverse student cohorts:

“Because some students already know the alphabet, it’s challenging to figure out how I can keep them engaged and give them things to do. When we’re learning something they already know and then I have a few students who speak Arabic at home to some extent at least in each class, I mean it really enriches our classes in a lot of ways, because those students often are excited to

share their knowledge and share with their peers. It's a chance for those students to really feel celebrated and like experts in the classroom in a way that they might not in other classes. And so that can be really nice. I think overall, it's a benefit to non-heritage learners to have heritage students in the class, though they may be intimidated occasionally by the heritage learners. Overall they're just being enriched by the experience of speaking with a heritage learner and learning from them."

Teacher 6: Travis

Travis is a teacher of Arabic who started learning the language when he was in college. He teaches middle school students at a public school in the mid-Atlantic region, which offers Arabic as a Foreign Language. In his class, Travis mostly teaches MSA. This is how he engages his specific student cohorts:

"Over the years my class has become 98% heritage learners. So that's something. It creates different challenges, and it's also a different reality when you're working with students that are all heritage learners. But I would say even the Arabic speakers, most of them don't know MSA very well. I believe that the reason for the class is to get them to read and write Arabic, and in order to do that, I tell them "you have to understand that there's a whole lot of differences between your dialect and MSA, there really are." And so I try to get them to understand that learning MSA is going to really open up their world, and most of them want it. No one's dialect is the formal dialect, everybody has to learn MSA, I would say, in some ways it's more democratic. It's more fair. Everybody has access to one dialect, that is nobody's dialect."

Part 2: Share and Compare in Pairs

Now that you have heard from these teachers about navigating student cohort diversity, think about what strategies might be successful in your classroom. Take 10 minutes to discuss the following questions with a partner. Remember to think of them specifically in relation to *your own* teaching context:

1. What do you think of the different strategies of these six teachers?
2. Do you see any of these teachers' strategies working successfully in your classroom? Why or why not?
3. Students bring diversity to the classroom in more ways, such as religious background. How might this shape the Arabic language classroom?
4. Students also bring diversity to the classroom through languages similar to Arabic. Can you think of ways to use their languages in your teaching?

Part 3: Share in Whole-Group Discussion

As a cohort, work with your colleagues to discuss the following questions:

- How important is it to think about cohort diversity in the Arabic classroom?
- Which of the teachers' contexts applies to you?
- Which of the teachers' approaches do you prefer and why?
- What can you take away from their experiences for your own classroom?

Exit ticket

Fill out your thoughts about the main topic of this module: navigating students' language backgrounds in your classroom.

1. What does my student cohort look like?
2. What are three strategies I can use?
3. In the future, I will _____

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