



Jacob Halpin



THIRTEEN WAYS TO MAKE A PLURAL



Preparing to
Learn Arabic



AUC
PRESS

“Learning Arabic is an amazing experience, though for some months it can feel more like just a maze. This insightful, sympathetic, and precise guide will help any learner achieve their goals and avoid getting lost on the way.”

—*Jon Wilks, British Ambassador to Qatar, Iraq, Oman, and Yemen and British government Arabic Spokesman*

“Jacob Halpin’s *Thirteen Ways to Make a Plural* is an excellent, succinct Arabic primer that would benefit any new student of the language. He offers sound, accurate advice that is evidently grounded in years of Arabic expertise. Highly recommend.”

—*Donovan Nagel, linguist, translator, and founder of TalkInArabic.com*

“This engaging volume is not a text book: it might rather be called a pre-text book. It won’t teach you Arabic, but it will give you an idea of the language. If you are thinking of studying it, or have decided to learn it or are in the early stages of learning it, you will find in it sound practical advice.”

—*Sir Harold Walker, former diplomat and one-time Principal Instructor at the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies, Lebanon*

“This is an invaluable guide for Arabic learners and teachers alike. One of the major challenges for students of Arabic as a foreign language is defining which aspects of this vast language and its dialects to learn and in which order; there is no easy answer and for each learner the priorities will differ. This very readable book helps learners to navigate the many different ways to approach studying Arabic and to manage their expectations and better evaluate their progress. Not just for beginners, this thought-provoking book is full of practical tips for intermediate and even advanced learners to develop their weaker skills and move to the next level.”

—*Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp, Arabic teacher and translator*

THIRTEEN WAYS TO MAKE A PLURAL

Preparing to Learn Arabic

Jacob Halpin

The American University in Cairo Press
Cairo New York

This electronic edition published in 2020 by
The American University in Cairo Press
113 Sharia Kasr el Aini, Cairo, Egypt
One Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY 10020
www.aucpress.com

Copyright © 2020 by Jacob Halpin

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

ISBN 978 977 416 952 6
eISBN 978 161 797 983 5

Version 1

CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[1. Arabic Essentials: Drawing Your Arabic Roadmap](#)

[2. Tricks of the Trade: How to Learn More Effectively](#)

[3. Tuning Your Arabic Engine: Grammar You Can't Ignore](#)

[4. Finding the Deep End: Arabic Immersion and Living Abroad](#)

[5. Speaking Like a Local: How to Get *Really* Good](#)

[6. The World of Work: Arabic as a Professional Skill](#)

[Common European Framework of Reference Table](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With thanks to all those who generously shared their experiences and insights into learning and teaching Arabic and to those who offered comments and feedback on earlier drafts. I hope this book goes some way to making this fascinating, if often perplexing, language more accessible to those wishing to learn.

INTRODUCTION

This book aims to shine a light on the process of learning one of the world's hardest but most important languages. Many students of Arabic invest a great deal of time and effort but end up disheartened or frustrated, having pursued their studies without a clear understanding of what they were aiming for or how to get there. That's where this book comes in.

Based on my personal experience of learning Arabic from zero to professional fluency, it also distills the insights of interviews and discussions with countless other students and teachers. It sets out the different forms of Arabic and will help you decide which is right for you. It will enable you to work out the level you want to obtain and to understand what success will require. It provides a host of tried-and-tested methods for making faster progress and discusses how to maximize the benefit of time studying in Arab countries. It introduces areas of grammar you can't afford to neglect and highlights common traps students fall into. It describes the level of Arabic required in different professions and what it takes to reach the highest levels of the language.

This book won't make Arabic easy. But I hope it will help you understand what lies ahead, to be clear on your goals, and to develop a plan to achieve them. And, ultimately, I hope it will help you gain a skill you can really use.

What This Book Is Not

This book is a practical guide to the learning process. It won't teach you grammar, verbs, or vocabulary. There are plenty of other books that do this. Nor does it claim to be the final authority on the subject. There is no one way to learn a language. Different things work for different people, and what is written here reflects my own interpretations of other people's experiences. Make use of what is offered but be open to other methods, particularly in relation to effective study methods, and ultimately do what works best for you. That has always been my approach.

A Note on Terminology

This book uses 'standard Arabic' to refer to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or, in Arabic, *fusha*. 'Colloquial Arabic' refers to local Arabic dialects or *'ammiya*.

ARABIC ESSENTIALS: DRAWING YOUR ARABIC ROADMAP

Several years ago during my first few weeks of learning Arabic I found myself watching an Arab comedian one night in a London pub. Chatting to her after the show I discovered that by day she was an Arabic teacher. On hearing I was learning the language she told me, with a gleam in her eye, that the first ten years were the hardest. I'm still not sure if she was joking.

How Difficult Is Arabic?

To address the question of difficulty more technically, linguists describe Arabic as a 'hard' language. One system for ranking foreign languages by difficulty for English speakers uses five categories. Category 1 is the easiest, and includes languages like Spanish and French. At the other end of the scale, category 5 includes Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean. Below these, in category 4, is Arabic, alongside others such as Amharic, Burmese, Georgian, and Somali.

What Makes Arabic Hard?

Firstly, there's the script. At the most basic level, Arabic functions like English: there is an alphabet from which words and sentences are built. But the letters themselves take time to master. Many are distinguished from one another only by the differing placement of a dot and most are cursive,

joining with those before and after. This means it takes a lot of practice to be able to distinguish between letters at speed, and to be able to read effectively. In addition, short vowels, written as small marks above or below the word, generally appear only in children's books, poetry, and the Qur'an and other religious texts. For example, combining the letter ب (pronounced 'b'), with the three vowel sounds reads, from right to left, *ba*, *bi*, *bu*: بَ بِي بُ

The absence of written vowels in most texts makes learning to read and memorizing vocabulary harder because short vowels are necessary for pronunciation and can change the meaning of a word if used incorrectly. The good news is that reading the right-to-left script, often assumed by non-Arabic speakers to be problematic, in fact comes automatically as it is dictated by the order of the letters. Try to read English from right to left: it simply doesn't work. You are obliged to read in the correct direction.

A second source of difficulty is Arabic sounds, around a third of which do not exist in English. There are six sounds produced in various parts of the throat or back of the mouth, roughly translated as a rough *kh*, a deep *q*, a rolling *gh*, a *h* from low in the throat, the 'ayn, which can't really be written in English but sounds a bit like a momentary strangulation, and the glottal stop. The last of these *is* actually found in English, although only with non-standard pronunciation: for example, the empty 'uh' at the center of 'little' when the 't' is dropped. Arabic also has deeper versions of the English *t*, *s*, *z*, and *d*, pronounced with the back of the tongue higher in the mouth. These take practice to produce accurately and to recognize reliably when listening. Students generally get there in the end, although maintaining accurate pronunciation while speaking quickly can remain a challenge even for advanced Arabists.

Arabic also boasts a formidable grammar. If you only learn colloquial Arabic you will spare yourself the more complex areas but will still need to learn and practice many core elements. While objectively not much more complex than many European languages, colloquial grammar is nonetheless different, requiring a lot of practice to feel natural. Students of standard Arabic will study more advanced grammar which, even setting aside the really advanced aspects, is expansive and incorporating it into fluid speech is a serious test. Chapter 3 has more on Arabic grammar.

The existence of multiple forms of Arabic is another major challenge. In particular, the division between standard Arabic, used for more formal

situations and topics, and the various colloquial dialects used in daily life. This means that those wishing to become proficient across a range of contexts must master two versions of the language, as the structure, pronunciation, and vocabulary differ significantly between them. There is more on the standard versus colloquial issue later in this chapter.

A further source of difficulty is Arabic vocabulary. Attempts to quantify exactly how many words there are run into difficulties around what counts as a word because Arabic has a unique system whereby words are derived from the three root letters of verbs (more on root letters in chapter 3). This generates almost endless possibilities, even if many are rarely, if ever, used. In short, Arabic vocabulary is big. Very big. As my first teacher of the language warned me ominously, with Arabic, the devil is in the synonyms. Indeed, Arabic students come across new words for terms they have already learned with a frequency that well outstrips even rich languages such as English. Even well-educated native speakers regularly come across words in literary texts with which they are unfamiliar. The wide variation both between dialects and between standard and colloquial forms adds another major challenge in this regard. For many advanced students it is the size of the vocabulary that prevents them from feeling they have ever mastered the language, despite being highly proficient. This is less of an issue with a focus solely on colloquial Arabic, which uses a smaller pool of words more flexibly.

And, yes, there really are thirteen ways to make a plural. Or even more, depending how you count them. When I asked my teacher how to make a plural in my second week of studying the language and she gave me this reply, I assumed she was joking until, to my alarm, she started to write out plural forms, one after the other, on the whiteboard. Most feminine plurals are easy, in fact, usually just requiring a standard two-letter suffix to be bolted on the end of the word. The challenge is with masculine nouns, which for the most part follow one of several patterns to form a ‘broken plural.’ The word is literally broken, with additional letters inserted. Fortunately, the plural form can often be identified from the shape of the original word, meaning that over time it becomes much easier to remember, and even predict, the plurals. Despite the initial confusion they can cause, Arabic plurals should not be a cause for concern as with time they are easily managed.

Who Can Learn Arabic?

Many myths surround language learning. Some people believe they just don't have an aptitude for it. But this is often because they didn't succeed with languages at school, which was more likely due to a lack of motivation, enjoyment, or effective teaching than paucity of ability. Conversely, there is a view that some are naturally gifted and, dropped into any foreign land, will soon be conversing having effortlessly absorbed the language.

Yet I have met no one who has reached a high level of Arabic without a great deal of study. It's true that a minority of people seem to memorize words more reliably just having heard them, while others enjoy foreign languages or have an interest in a particular country, which motivates their learning. But anyone can learn a foreign language, including Arabic, and while some will take longer than others, this probably has more to do with motivation, quality of teaching, and having a clear study plan than with any innate linguistic ability.

If you are already familiar with the Arabic letters and corresponding sounds you have a head start. This is the case with many Muslims who do not speak Arabic but who have studied the Qur'an, learning to read and recite without necessarily knowing the meaning. You will still have to start at the beginning but initial familiarity with the script will help you move faster through the initial stages. In a full-time study program, this is likely to accelerate your progression through the earlier stages by a month or two.

Experience of learning other languages helps with learning Arabic but is certainly not essential. It helps already to understand the components of a language, which may come from a knowledge of English grammar or from learning foreign languages. If you know how verbs, nouns, adjectives, participles, prepositions, and objects function in a sentence you will have a reference point for Arabic structure and grammar. But if these terms are unfamiliar you can learn them as part of your Arabic studies, preferably assisted by a good teacher. For those with a knowledge of Latin, those hours spent learning grammatical cases will pay dividends during the later stages of Arabic grammar as the concept will already be familiar.

Modern Standard Arabic versus Colloquial Arabic

Avoid Arabic No-Man's-Land

The breadth of the Arabic language, together with the standard–colloquial dichotomy, means that it is vital to consider at the start of your studies the form you want to prioritize, what your end goal is, and whether you have the time and resources to get there. Without a plan you may set off in the wrong direction and find after months, or years, of study that you have developed a knowledge of areas of Arabic that don't serve the purpose you require. Or you may find yourself in the linguistic no-man's-land in which very many Arabic students find themselves, at the end of the study period with intermediate-level standard Arabic and some basic colloquial: the product of a great deal of work, and far beyond the basics of 'holiday Arabic,' but insufficient for professional or significant social use. This chapter helps you through this planning process by explaining the different types of Arabic, what they are used for, and how long progress is likely to take.

Modern Standard and Colloquial Arabic: What's the Difference and Which Should I Learn?

Modern Standard Arabic (otherwise known as MSA, standard Arabic, or *fusha*, in Arabic) is “proper,” or formal, Arabic. It derives from classical Arabic, which is found in the Qur'an. Standard Arabic is largely consistent across the Arabic-speaking world and Arabs value highly the ability to speak it well. It is used in news reporting, speeches, interactions in formal settings, and almost all written material. The vocabulary is extensive, and the grammar complex and exact. It is cumbersome and unwieldy for everyday, informal settings, however, and using it in such a context sounds inappropriately formal to a native speaker's ear.

Colloquial Arabic (*'ammiya* in Arabic) refers to the various local dialects found across the Arabic-speaking world. In broad terms, Arabic-speaking countries of the Levant region (Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon) share a dialect, with some variations, which is generally understood elsewhere. Iraqi, Gulf, and Egyptian Arabic are three further main dialects, the latter of which is widely understood thanks to the popularity of Egyptian films. The dialect spoken in other north African countries (Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria) forms another significant

grouping, again with variations, which is very distinct and not easily understood by Arabs elsewhere.

Colloquial Arabic has less grammar than standard Arabic, a reduced vocabulary, and easier verb conjugations. Perhaps less elegant but more practical, it is used among friends, family, and colleagues in all kinds of informal daily exchanges. Most colloquial vocabulary derives from standard Arabic, and much of it bears a resemblance, but each dialect has its own lexicon, particularly when it comes to everyday terminology. Together with strongly varying pronunciation this makes each dialect unique. Colloquial Arabic is rich in idioms, sayings, and colorful expressions but lacks terminology for more sophisticated areas such as politics, economics, and the law. Consequently, when discussing such topics speakers are obliged to adopt the vocabulary, if not necessarily the more formal sentence structures, of standard Arabic. For native speakers and the few non-Arabs that reach an equivalent level, colloquial Arabic is sometimes used in formal settings as a linguistic tool. Political speeches, for instance, are typically in standard Arabic to convey gravitas and authority, but the speaker may switch to more colloquial language when he or she wishes to connect with the audience on a more personal or emotional level.

To give an example of how an everyday sentence can vary depending on the register, to ask, “Would you (plural) like to sit inside because of the cold weather?” in standard Arabic, you would say:

هل تريدون ان تجلسوا في الداخل لان الطقس بارد؟

Transliterated: *hal tureeduna an tajlisu fi ad-daakhil li-anna at-taqs baarid?*

This sounds very formal and rather long-winded for such a simple question.

A slightly less formal version of this might read:

بتحبوا تجلسوا في الداخل لان الطقس بارد؟

Transliterated: *b-tahibbu tajlisu fi ad-daakhil li-anna at-taqs baarid?*

Note that this is largely the same as the standard Arabic version above, but with the very formal first few words substituted for something more conversational. To convey the difference between these in English, the more

formal of the two approximates to, ‘Do you want that we sit inside . . . ?’ while the second version is closer to, ‘Would you like to sit inside . . . ?’

Finally, in Levantine colloquial Arabic this could be rendered as:

بدكم تقعدو جوا عشان الجو بارد؟

Transliterated: *bidkum tuq‘udu juwwa ‘ashaan aj-jaww baarid?*

Here, nothing remains of the standard Arabic version except for the final word, *baarid* (cold). It is entirely informal and appropriate for speaking to friends or family, but would sound rather casual in a very formal context, such as at the outset of a political or diplomatic meeting. By contrast, the first example is such a stiff and rigid way of asking what is essentially quite an informal question that it is unlikely ever to be heard in conversation outside of a classroom exercise, although you might find it in written form, such as in dialogue in a novel.

Whether to focus on colloquial or standard Arabic is a perennial dilemma of Arabic students. Standard Arabic provides a deeper understanding of the language. It allows you to converse on more advanced subjects, to read and write, and to understand the media and literature of the region as a whole. It equips you with Arabic that is understood across the region and it provides a solid base onto which the basics of colloquial Arabic can be added relatively quickly.

On the downside, standard Arabic is much harder to learn and takes a long time to become proficient in. You will rarely, if ever, need to speak in full standard Arabic although some of the more complex verbs and vocabulary that it encompasses will feature in more formal contexts. In ordinary conversation, standard Arabic feels unnatural to native speakers who are in any event likely to reply in colloquial Arabic, meaning that it is difficult to find opportunities to practice conversation outside the classroom. Chatting informally in standard Arabic feels stilted and you are unlikely to understand much of a social group conversation, where native speakers nearly always use dialect. And without at least a few colloquial Arabic basics your formality may elicit an amused smile when deployed in the store or the café. To flip it around, picture a foreigner walking into a local shop in London and asking for a bag of apples in fully articulated medieval English.

Colloquial Arabic is itself not easy to learn but you can expect faster progress toward conversational fluency. As long as you spend time in the relevant Arabic-speaking country you are guaranteed to be able to use what you learn. From day one, classroom learning can be used in everyday situations, helping with practice and motivation. As you improve you'll be able to handle informal and social situations in a way that feels natural to those you're talking to and helps you to build relationships and get to know people. But your Arabic will be country-specific, you will understand little when listening to the news or reading material of any complexity, and you will find it hard to engage in more advanced topics of conversation.

There is no right answer as to which form of Arabic to prioritize. Broadly speaking, if you want the basics to get by while living abroad or on holiday, you should learn colloquial Arabic. If you want to gain fluency relatively quickly to engage in informal and social conversation, and you know which Arab country you'll be living in, colloquial Arabic is again the better option. But if you want a deeper understanding of the language, or if your requirements go beyond the limits of colloquial Arabic, standard Arabic is the appropriate choice. Some knowledge of standard Arabic is likely to be required for certain professional sectors although very many roles will require colloquial skills (chapter 6 gives an overview of career areas using Arabic and the form of the language required). At a minimum, alongside a primary focus on standard Arabic you are likely to need some colloquial basics to manage daily encounters and avoid being thrown when speakers of standard Arabic mix in elements of dialect or slip into local pronunciation.

When both are required, there are different views on the best order in which to study colloquial and standard Arabic. An approach that works for many students is to focus first on standard Arabic. Once you have obtained an intermediate level, your understanding of the structures and rules that underpin the language will allow you to learn a dialect relatively quickly. Many students warn against studying both forms at once in the early stages as it can be confusing. The partial exception is that if you are about to move to an Arabic-speaking country, it is well worth equipping yourself with at least the very basics of colloquial Arabic to facilitate daily life.

How Long Does It Take to Learn Arabic?

It is possible to set out realistic timelines for learning Arabic, which vary depending on the form of the language you are learning. A useful reference point for this is the system used by the Council of Europe to grade foreign language ability, called the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The CEFR has six levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2. A1 is very basic while C2 is highly fluent. This section refers to the CEFR definitions of various levels of language ability. (A detailed version of the CEFR is appended on page 79.) Your rate of progress will of course relate to the type of Arabic you have chosen to study. As discussed earlier, it will be faster in the earlier stages with colloquial Arabic. Below is an overview of the rate at which you could expect to progress through the levels of the CEFR in standard and colloquial Arabic, assuming a good level of focus and motivation. This is intended only as an approximate guide, as individual experiences of course vary.

Time to Progress with Standard Arabic

Beginner Level

Levels A1 to A2 allow you to get by more easily in an Arabic-speaking country and begin to engage people in conversation. At A1 you can use basic phrases, introduce yourself, ask and answer simple questions, say where you are from, and discuss items you possess. In a course that covers elementary grammar as well as speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, reaching A1 takes in the region of 120 hours of classes plus two or three hours of daily self-study.

At A2 level you can talk about simple topics such as a visit or your family, as well as read and write texts such as postcards and simple letters. This requires a total of around 250–300 hours of classes plus daily study time. This equates to full-time study for twelve to fifteen weeks (four hours a day, five days a week) with two to three hours of homework each day. Or, over a longer time period, four hours of evening classes a week for about a year and a half with a few hours of homework each week.

Intermediate Level

At levels B1 to B2 you can have more substantial conversations. At B1 you can understand the main points when discussing familiar topics, and can

talk and write about a range of topics in simple terms. Attaining B1 level requires a total of around 450 hours of instruction in addition to homework. For full-time instruction (four hours of classes a day) this works out as roughly twenty-two weeks of study, plus two or three hours of daily self-study. Over a longer period, this would be four hours of evening classes per week for over two years, together with weekly homework.

At B2 level you can understand a large part of current affairs TV and radio programs and, given time, can read many news articles and write letters dealing with more complex topics. Reaching this level of standard Arabic takes about 650 hours of lessons, plus study time. That's around thirty-two weeks of four-hour classes a day plus two to three hours of daily study, or three years of evening classes at four hours a week, with homework.

Advanced Level

At levels C1 to C2 you can handle complex topics and discussions, ultimately moving toward the upper end of fluency. There is a big jump from B2 to C1: vocabulary size and the required speed of comprehension are the major differences, with listening a particular challenge. To make this step up you need to work through a large volume of practice material or have extensive exposure to real-life interactions.

At C1 level you can conduct transactions such as business meetings, although the other party may need to slow down or modify their vocabulary to accommodate your lack of full proficiency. You can largely understand television programs on familiar topics, you can speak accurately on complex subjects and you can read a wide range of material with good understanding. This level requires around 1,300 to 1,400 hours of classes, plus daily self-study. This equates to full-time study for about a year and a half, with four hours of classes and two to three hours of homework per day. While in theory this could be done through evening classes over a very extended period, in practice reaching this level is likely to require more intense study, particularly at the later stages.

Finally, C2 level is about as good as you can get without speaking Arabic as a first language. Moving from C1 to C2 will almost certainly require routine use of Arabic in real-life settings over an extended period to solidify speaking and listening skills, while significantly expanding your

vocabulary. This transition does not meaningfully translate into hours of study.

Time to Progress with Colloquial Arabic

It is harder to quantify the likely rate of progression with colloquial Arabic. Learning standard Arabic is a very classroom-based endeavor due to the limited use it has in informal everyday exchanges, making the progression curve relatively predictable. But, as colloquial Arabic can be put to use from the first lesson, learning relates closely to the amount of practice you put in outside the classroom. In particular, living and working abroad can make a huge difference to progression and confidence.

As a rough guide, until the intermediate stages, colloquial Arabic can be compared to other ‘medium difficulty’ languages, such as Russian, Hebrew, or Greek, that are significantly different to English and use a different script. It is unusual to find courses teaching colloquial Arabic at B2 level and above. At this stage it becomes difficult to separate colloquial from standard Arabic because expressing more complex ideas increasingly requires the vocabulary, structures, and grammar of standard Arabic. More advanced students also tend to want to develop their reading and writing skills, which requires a focus on standard Arabic and limits demand for advanced-level colloquial instruction.

If you focus on colloquial Arabic, and follow a course using a mixture of transliteration (writing using Latin script rather than Arabic) alongside some study of the Arabic script, you are likely to reach A1 level after around 60 hours of instruction, and A2 level after 120 hours, plus self-study. This means that A2 level is achievable over about six weeks of full time study, such as an intensive summer course.

Reaching levels B1 to B2 is likely to take a total of between three and six months of study, at two to three hours of classes per day plus daily self-study. A period spent in-country with plenty of opportunities to put your learning into practice will make a big difference in achieving this.

Learning Path over an Eighteen-month Period

The table below shows the approximate level of standard Arabic that you would be likely to reach after a given number of months of full-time study.

This example is based on a standard Arabic program focused on politics and the media.

By the end of the eighteen months you could expect to reach C1 level in these areas but would not be able to deal with literary topics or colloquial conversation to the same level. This timeline assumes three to four hours of classes and two to three hours of self-study per day.

Month Examples of main topics and focus of study Examples of ability at this level

- | | | |
|------------|---|---|
| 1–2 | Familiarization with letters and sounds. Basic vocabulary and grammar including pronouns, possessives, masculine, feminine nouns. Basic sentence construction and some past tense. | A1 level. Can understand basic expressions and phrases, written and spoken. Capable of simple exchanges of information such as introductions, personal details, family and activities. |
| 3–4 | Building simple vocabulary. Grammar including the definite article, simple sentence structures, plurals, questions, and negation. Listening to slow, simple audio material using rehearsed vocabulary. | A2 level. Can talk about simple topics such as school, shopping, describing family, a photo, or a visit. Can read simple signs, adverts and invitations. |
| 5–6 | Wider vocabulary, including topics such as government, politics, sports, biography, and traditions, and expressing decisions, agreement, opinions, advice, suggestions, interests, and comparison. Grammar including questions, noun–adjective structures, verb roots and patterns, connectors, enquiries, conditionals, and prepositions. Listening to simple audio material covering wider range of vocabulary, with focus on keywords. | B1 level. Can hold simple social conversation, discuss, resolve simple problems, make straightforward enquiries, give simple reasons and explanations, and identify main topics in media pieces. |

7–9 Vocabulary such as praise, surprise, **B2 level**. Able to criticism, recounting events, debate, and understand main ideas persuasion; and topics such as business of newspaper articles. transactions, specific political issues, Conversation possible work topics, and bank or hospital on varied topics if interactions. Grammar including active interlocutor speaks and passive participles, case endings, clearly avoiding irregular verbs, prepositions, and the complex vocabulary. passive voice. Listening practice based on Able to explain simple audio of familiar topics, and viewpoint with greater identifying key ideas from authentic accuracy. material. Focus on increasing speed of reading even though comprehension is limited.

10–18 More advanced vocabulary, now totaling **C1 level**. Good level of several thousand words, including leading fluency enabling a conversation, clarifying mistakes, effective discussion of a expressing degrees of certainty, range of topics. Able to negotiating and finding solutions; and a articulate more complex greater range of political topics such as ideas. Approaching full economics, development, regional issues, understanding of audio energy, arts, and culture. Grammar material when including advanced verbs and a range of vocabulary is common advanced grammatical structures. and pronunciation clear. Listening many hours per week to Can understand more authentic audio material such as Arabic complex written texts news and discussion programs. Extensive given time, and extract in-depth reading covering a range of main ideas when topics, and building reading speed of reading at pace. Can simpler material. write letters.

N/A Further strengthening of grammatical **C2 level**. High level of structures, significant additional fluency and accuracy; vocabulary (a few thousand more words). can understand with Hundreds of hours of speaking and ease almost everything listening to build ability with varied heard and read. speed, topics, pronunciation, and accent. Approaching educated native speaker level.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE: HOW TO LEARN MORE EFFECTIVELY

Even with the smartest approach to your studies, learning Arabic is going to require some hard graft. All those books with promises to teach you ‘Arabic in 30 days’ aren’t likely to leave you with more than a sprinkling of the basics. Which isn’t bad for thirty days, but doesn’t change the fact that there are unfortunately no easy shortcuts to making real progress with Arabic. But you can ‘study smart’ by making use of a host of tried-and-tested techniques and resources to find the methods that work for you, maximize your progress, and keep your motivation high.

Finding a Good Teacher

Having a good teacher makes a huge difference. Teaching yourself is really tough even for the brightest and most motivated students, particularly with standard Arabic. Having the support of a teacher is especially valuable in the early stages when new grammar and structures can quickly leave you baffled without a teacher to explain and clarify.

There is also the motivational angle. Arabic feels like a long haul at times so having a teacher to support and push you can really help. Time and money can be obstacles to classroom instruction but there are ways to manage this, such as online Arabic schools that offer web lessons with native speakers, which are both cheaper and more flexible than a regular course. At the very least, checking in with a teacher periodically, for

instance via occasional Skype lessons, as an accompaniment to self-directed study will allow you to answer the many questions that will arise and receive confirmation that you are on the right track.

Students have their own preferences when it comes to teaching styles and it is usually clear if your teacher is pushing you forward effectively. But there are some general points to look out for. A good teacher should understand your level and be able to adjust his or her pace and level accordingly, to get you speaking as much as possible: if you're not talking in the classroom, it's never going to happen outside it. Your teacher should speak English only when needed to explain something (and some students prefer not at all). S/he should also follow a clear course structure that gradually builds and repeats vocabulary, with exercises tailored to reading, writing, speaking, and listening as appropriate to the course aims. Being able to *explain* the rules of the language, not just tell you what sounds right to the native ear for a given example, is also crucial. There are some excellent Arabic teachers out there, but there are also some poor ones. So don't be shy about requesting changes in your teacher's style, or changing your teacher altogether if needed.

Vocabulary

The single biggest task facing Arabic students is learning vocabulary. This is in many ways the engine that will drive your Arabic forward. Even with strong grammar and slick verb conjugation, without a growing vocabulary you will struggle to expand your limits of expression and comprehension.

Building vocabulary requires you to play the long game. During a class you'll probably write down dozens of new words. If you are studying daily this is far more than you can hope to memorize before the next class (you'll need to keep reviewing older vocabulary as well). It is better to focus properly on ten new words than skim over fifty, which you then forget. Use common sense to prioritize those words you are more likely to use and don't feel guilty about leaving the rest. The important ones will soon appear again.

Don't worry if the words don't want to stick, particularly in the first few months. This is normal. Memorizing vocabulary is much more difficult when the letters and many of the sounds are unfamiliar. It can be disheartening to keep forgetting and relearning but this is just part of the

process. I remember a fellow student telling me to cheer up and stop worrying about forgetting words for the third or fourth time because that's what is *meant* to happen. Just keep persevering and don't let it put you off. In the early stages it can be tempting to 'cheat' by transliterating words into Latin characters, which are more easily memorized, particularly for visual learners who like to picture the word. But, unless you're following a basic colloquial course that avoids using Arabic letters, you need to invest time in building confidence with the letters. The speed-reading techniques below will help with this.

The task of countless hours spent studying vocabulary can be made less daunting, and more enjoyable, by employing some tried-and-tested techniques. Below are some methods to keep in mind. Each comes recommended by students and teachers. As with all the sections in this chapter, try them out, adapt them, and use what works for you.

And remember that there is light at the end of the tunnel: although there will always be new words to learn, the rate will eventually slow. As your proficiency builds, the letters, sounds, and patterns become much more natural and learning new words becomes significantly easier and quicker.

Vocabulary Games

There are many games out there, including online, that aid learning vocabulary. Here are two examples using flashcards:

Set of ten

Place a group of ten new flashcards on the table with the Arabic side facing down, English facing up. Choose one and test yourself to recall the Arabic word. Check and replace it. Repeat with a second card, then return to the first. Then a third card, back to the second, then back to the first. In this way, keep selecting new cards after reinforcing the words you began with. As you repeatedly return to earlier cards your recall will become faster.

Storytelling

Take ten to twenty flashcards with vocabulary that you have recently studied. Spread them out on the table with the Arabic side down. Then improvise a story in Arabic, out loud, incorporating all of the words in front of you. The story can be nonsensical as long as the grammar and

vocabulary usage are accurate. This game allows you to practice recalling vocabulary as part of a longer dialogue.

Learning in Context

Arabic teachers often stress the importance of learning vocabulary in context, by which they mean not reviewing isolated words on flashcards but using them in something approaching a real-life situation. Seeing or hearing the word as part of a sentence does help you to remember it. But finding the required context can be difficult: if you have twenty new words to learn, it is unlikely that the next newspaper article you read is going to contain them. To overcome this, here are some ways to create the context.

Write the context

Write out full sentences containing the new words and then read them back the next day once you have forgotten what you wrote. This can be incorporated when writing out flashcards for new vocabulary—write sentences instead of single words. It takes longer to write the cards but is worth it for those words that refuse to stick. Many students also find that writing words repeatedly is a useful tool for memorizing vocabulary.

No hints in the margins

If you are learning words from an article, don't write translations up and down the margins. Use a separate sheet. Leave the page clean so that once you have studied the words you can reread the article, forcing yourself to recall the meanings. With time you will create a stock of articles that test your vocabulary in context.

Review tailored textbook material

Make full use of written samples typically used throughout textbooks as these are tailor-made to include the vocabulary covered in the book. Passages from earlier chapters are a good source of in-context material for revising vocabulary you've previously studied.

Record your teacher

If you have a teacher or willing Arabic-speaking friend, record them reading the article or sentences containing the words you are studying. Play

the recording back later, listening until you can understand the new words as you hear them. This way you will build a bank of practice audio material tailored to vocabulary you have studied.

Timed Repetition

Memory experts tell us that the length of time you remember something increases with each revision. You can maximize the benefit of each revision session by reviewing just before you forget the information, meaning that revising at intervals is more efficient than reviewing over and over in the first day or two. Different studies vary in their recommendations for the ideal time between revisions, but generally advise that information is reviewed after a day, a week, a fortnight, and then a month, before it shifts to your long-term memory. Some also recommend an initial review after ten minutes—in practice, this probably means straight after class, which some students find very useful. Whatever the ideal pattern, the important point is that effective vocabulary revision requires a system to maximize efficiency. With thousands of Arabic words ahead, study time is at a premium so making use of this approach can really pay off.

An old-school way to do this is to take a new set of words each day, write them on flashcards, and learn them. Then write on the front of the set the date the cards need to be revised. Each day, introduce another ten words and revise all those due for review, adding a new due date to the front of the pack. The more twenty-first-century approach is to use one of various apps that automate this process effectively. These enable you to review vocabulary during quiet moments wherever you are, without having to carry a box of flashcards around. Some apps are designed to identify the words you struggle to recall and to tag them for more frequent revision. Anki is popular but there are many others on the market. Whichever method you prefer, moderate your ambition with the number of words you add each day because after a week you'll also be revising the words of several previous days. If you stick to ten new words daily you should avoid being overwhelmed.

Revise at the Right Time

Memorizing vocabulary effectively requires a high level of concentration. If your mind is wandering and you aren't taking in the words, your study session will be of limited use. Identify the times in the day when your focus is sharper and plan your study accordingly. You can take advantage of dead time, such as sitting on the bus or waiting for a weekly appointment. Some people find that when they have only twenty or thirty minutes available their concentration increases. If this is the case, make use of it and fit vocabulary revision into those empty spaces, lightening the load during your main study sessions.

Make sure your study times align with opportunities to embed the vocabulary in your memory through using it. Don't spend a whole evening drilling a set of words if you know you won't have a chance to practice using them for a week, by which time your learning will have faded. Instead, set aside time to review words ahead of a conversation class and then embed your learning through active use.

Incorporate Preferred Learning Styles

People typically have a preference for visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or tactile learning, or a combination of these. If you can identify your preferred style, you can tailor your vocabulary efforts and increase your efficiency. Visual learners respond well to pictures, images, colors, and other kinds of visual media. Methods that suit visual learners include writing related words around an image or diagram to create visual cues, sticking notes with sets of vocabulary in places they see frequently, such as on a cupboard or the bathroom mirror, and flashcard apps that include images. Auditory learners learn effectively through listening. They tend to respond well to audio-based language tuition programs and find it useful to listen to recordings of new vocabulary. Kinesthetic and tactile learners both prefer a more active approach to learning. They are likely to find particular benefit in interactive exercises, role-playing, and simulated scenarios. Experiment with different methods and see what works for you.

Use Word Association

Word association is a powerful memorization tool. The idea is to connect the English word and its Arabic equivalent using an image that incorporates

them both. For example, to remember that تفاح (*tuffah*) means apple, imagine a *tougher* cartoon apple flexing its muscles. To remember that طاولة (*taawila*) means table, you might picture a large *wheel* dripping with sticky black *tar* rolling across a kitchen table. The more comic or outrageous the image, the better for memorization. It can require a few minutes to come up with an image but can be a very effective method, particularly for those words that just don't want to stick. It is harder to create images for longer words, or more abstract ideas, but even if you can use the method to recall the first half of a word, that can often be enough to trigger the memory recall process.

Speaking

Improving your spoken Arabic is about doing rather than just learning. When you are writing you can take your time processing verb conjugations and grammatical constructions, and recalling vocabulary. But speaking requires this to happen at speed. This means that the linguistic calculations must be so well-practiced that they can take place with minimal thought. This requires lots of *doing*. You cannot learn to speak Arabic—or any other language—on your own or from a book. You have to find ways to exercise the Arabic part of your brain to make it faster and more reliable. If you are living in an Arabic-speaking country there are of course more opportunities to do this. But even without traveling there are many ways you can practice what you are learning.

Language Exchanges

Language exchanges are an excellent, social way of practicing a language and can be a welcome alternative to the classroom. It requires a couple of hours and need only cost the price of a coffee. Find an Arabic-speaker who wants to learn your language (English-speakers have an advantage as their language is always in demand), get together and split the time between the two languages. A web search will offer various websites that can facilitate finding a partner. You may want to meet a few and see who you work best with. If your partner already speaks your language reasonably well that can be useful as they can explain vocabulary when you get stuck.

To maximize the utility, identify topics you want to practice and ask to focus the discussion on them. You might cover an area you've studied in class to consolidate vocabulary and build your confidence in a more realistic context. Try noting down new words, revising them ahead of the next session, and then making a point of using them as you might with a formal Arabic class. It is also possible to do language exchanges via Skype, which is time-efficient, although understanding can be slightly harder.

Language Groups

In many cities you can find language meet-ups, the group equivalent of a language exchange. These typically meet once or twice a week and are a good way of meeting a range of people either learning Arabic or speaking it as their first language. If you find that you are meeting different people each time and doing a lot of introductions but not enough substantial conversation you can also use the group as a means of meeting a more regular one-on-one exchange partner.

Conversation Classes

For those with limited time, the downside of a language exchange is that you will spend half of it speaking your own language. If you can afford it, you might choose to pay for conversation classes. This needn't be with a proper Arabic teacher as it is essentially just someone to talk to, which makes it much cheaper. Universities are a good place to look as it shouldn't be too hard to find a native Arabic speaker and students are often looking to make some extra money. Try putting an advert in the students' union. There are also online language partner facilities such as italki, Madinah Arabic, and Natakallam, which will connect you with tutors or conversation partners for an hourly fee. As with language exchange partners, don't be shy about trying different tutors if you don't feel you're getting what you want from the sessions.

Listening

The most important activity for improving your listening ability is holding real-life conversations. There is something about being in a situation where

you are forced to try to understand, because someone is speaking directly to you, that pushes your ear to improve. Although opportunities for this are fewer if you are not in an Arabic-speaking country, language exchanges and other creative solutions can still secure opportunities for real conversation. Even if you are living in an Arabic-speaking country, however, everyday interactions alone are unlikely to be a sufficient basis for building listening skills.

Unless you are lucky enough to be immersed in Arabic, by living with an Arabic-speaking family, for instance, or by acquiring a group of Arabic-speaking friends, interactions with strangers are likely to cover a limited number of topics. Informal conversation is also likely to be in colloquial Arabic, limiting what you can practice. You are therefore likely to need to follow an extensive program of structured listening exercises. The following section gives advice on how to do this.

Leave Al Jazeera for Later

In the earlier stages you are likely to raise your listening level most quickly by gradually increasing speed and complexity using a tailored program of material. It can be tempting to push yourself to listen to hours of Arabic news to pick out as much as you can, and this may have some benefit in accustoming your ear to the sounds. But it can also become frustrating as you recognize little while the rest just flows over you. If your vocabulary is nowhere near that level, you won't understand, regardless of how many times you press repeat. You are likely to increase your listening ability most effectively by listening to material where you can grasp a significant amount of what you hear, leaving the advanced stuff for later.

Consolidating Basic Listening

At the beginner level in particular make full use of the prerecorded material that comes with many textbooks. This typically begins with slow, simple, short sentences using the words you have learned. Rather than just listening once and moving on, replay it repeatedly until you can process each word as you hear it.

As you progress, these slower, prerecorded sections extend to a few sentences, then a few paragraphs. Again, the content is usually based on

new vocabulary from the textbook, allowing you to hear the words you have been studying. The sounds and structures will still feel relatively alien, which means you will find that recordings of this length are challenging even though you have studied the vocabulary. Again, listen multiples times until you can comfortably follow and understand each word as you hear it.

As you progress to more advanced vocabulary continue to push yourself to listen to the audio material provided until you are comfortable with it. Ask your teacher to record longer passages that you have studied at a slightly reduced pace, so that you can push your listening skills to keep pace with your reading. The challenge is not simply to listen, but to hear each word, actively recognizing and understanding it, rather than allowing it to wash over you.

Sentence by Sentence

As you reach an intermediate (B1–B2) level you will listen to more material from authentic sources such as news extracts. It is common at this stage for students' vocabulary to reach a higher level than their listening skills, meaning they understand more from reading the transcript of a listening piece than from listening to it. When listening to longer pieces the student may miss many words that they would understand in a written text because their ear is not fast enough to process this more difficult vocabulary amid the rapid flow of Arabic.

To push your ear to work harder and to pick up the more difficult words you have studied, take a short listening piece and listen repeatedly to it sentence by sentence, until you understand all you possibly can. Try also repeating interesting sentences several times out loud once you have grasped them, as some students find this aids both comprehension and accurate pronunciation. If after listening to a phrase three or four times you still don't understand, move on: it probably contains vocabulary you haven't yet learned. This can feel tedious and repetitive but it will improve your listening skills by forcing you to pick out every word, and to hear and process every syllable.

Hearing Every Syllable

As you reach a more advanced level (B2–C1), two main factors are likely to limit your listening comprehension. The first is the size of your vocabulary; the second is the speed at which you are able to understand it. Even if the vocabulary is within your range, you might understand a written transcript yet struggle to comprehend a quick audio version of the same piece. A technique to improve your ability here is to focus on listening to every syllable that is spoken, without worrying too much about the overall meaning. This pushes you to digest the sounds at natural speed, without stopping to recall the meaning of harder vocabulary. As the speed at which you can recognize syllables, and then words, increases, the meaning will follow naturally. Doing this for a couple of hours periodically can make a big difference to your listening comprehension.

Find the Right Practice Material

As your listening comprehension improves and your vocabulary widens there is a growing requirement to consume larger amounts of listening material in order to reinforce the vocabulary in your memory and enable you to recognize it at speed. The process is incremental and requires countless hours of practice to progress, which means that the more Arabic you listen to every day, the better.

Seek out high-quality practice material to help with this. For standard Arabic, you might start with the Al Jazeera Arabic website (aljazeera.net), an excellent source of short news reports, in-depth reportage, and political discussion with content available to stream and in podcast format. Short programs like *Ma wara' al-khabar* (ما وراء الخبر) and *Liqa' al-yوم* (لقاء اليوم) are good for political discussion. Other Arabic news sites such as Al Arabiya (alarabiya.net) have similar material available. The BBC Xtra Arabic podcasts are very useful and the Arabic they use is pitched at an easier level.

A less polished form of standard Arabic, mixing in some local accent and vocabulary, is often found on political discussion shows and in semiformal contexts more generally. It is well worth spending time accustoming your ear to this or you may find that the rough edges throw your understanding when compared with the purer standard Arabic typically found in the classroom. Material available for streaming from the websites of many Arab television networks is useful and you can find many

programs on YouTube. Useful places to start, depending on the required accent, are ‘*Ala at-tawila* (على الطاولة) on the al-Sumaria network for Arabic with an Iraqi flavor; *Kalam an-nas* (كلام الناس) on LBC for Lebanese; CBC Egypt; or Orient TV’s *Alo Suriya* (ألو سوريا) for Syrian. There is also a range of podcasts covering current affairs that combine standard and colloquial Arabic. For example, the Jordanian ‘*aib* (عيب), which looks at social issues, *Blank Maps* (خرائط اللامكان) and *Arab Ras*, which discuss challenges faced by people around the Arab world. You may need to do some digging before you find the material that suits your needs as programs and podcasts, and their availability online, come and go.

If you want to practice genuinely colloquial Arabic then soap operas are a good resource. There are many out there, both current and classics like the Damascene *Bab al-hara* that can be bought as box sets. Try the websites of television networks relevant to the dialect you are learning or, if you in an Arabic-speaking country, ask for soap opera recommendations from a local DVD shop. Some of these are originally from outside the Middle East and dubbed in Arabic, which can be a good thing as it tends to result in simpler Arabic.

To maximize your learning you may find it useful to listen multiple times to more difficult passages or to store episodes for subsequent review. This is straightforward with material on DVD and other storage media, but material streamed from YouTube and elsewhere can also be downloaded and stored with the right software. There are various free programs that allow you to convert and store video and audio, subject to any legal restrictions attached to the material.

Reading

Beyond the obvious need for vocabulary, two of the main components of a strong reading ability are letter recognition speed and accurate comprehension of sentence structures. In the script of our native language the brain has seen the letters so many millions of times that they have become utterly hardwired and require almost no processing time. But when we first grapple with the Arabic script we return, childlike, to deciphering each letter individually, speed of recognition gradually improving with practice. Arabic sentence structure presents another challenge in that sentences are typically longer and more complex than in English and most

other European languages. Failure to understand the relationship between elements within a sentence will often render the meaning unclear even when you are largely comfortable with the vocabulary. Here are some techniques for improving your reading speed and structural understanding.

Forget Comprehension

Take a text of around two hundred words and read it out loud as fast as you can. Don't worry about understanding it, but do ensure that you pronounce every letter. The aim is to increase the speed at which the brain can process the Arabic script. Time how long it takes you to complete the text, then repeat once or twice more, aiming each time to complete the passage more quickly. Take a new text each day of a similar length and record the times to see your progress.

Timed Passages

As your reading becomes stronger and you can handle news articles with a good degree of comprehension you should continue to focus on speed in order to develop the ability to skim read. Take some straightforward texts, such as short news pieces or the introductory paragraphs of longer ones, and read them within a given time. One hundred words per minute is a good target: aim to extract the main points while maintaining this pace (this is fast so don't worry if you are missing a lot). If you make this part of your daily study routine you can expect your speed-reading to improve significantly.

Deconstructing Sentences

Arabic sentences tend to be much longer than English ones. As a result, identifying how all the grammatical elements relate can be quite a challenge. As your reading starts to become proficient (level B1 and above) it is useful to work through a number of short texts to ensure you fully understand the structures being used. This means identifying the subject(s) and the object(s) of each sentence, the associated verbs, the relationships between nouns and related pronouns, the role of adverbs and adjectives, and the function or meaning of any prepositions. Are you clear which subject is

acting on which object, via which verb? Or which noun each pronoun refers to? To force yourself to clarify what is going on, try underlining each pronoun and drawing a line linking it back to the corresponding noun. Ask your teacher for explanations of the confusing bits rather than just glossing over them. It feels laborious, but deconstructing a few articles like this will make a lasting difference to your reading precision and overall comfort with common grammatical structures.

Resist the Dictionary

Push yourself to extract as much meaning as you can from a passage before reaching for the dictionary. When you encounter sentences you do not understand, complete the section of text anyway. Difficult elements often resolve themselves once you understand the remainder. If it remains unclear, reread the section once or twice and consider what you know about the unfamiliar words: are they adjectives, nouns, verbs? How is the verb conjugated, and what does this tell you? What are the root letters and are they familiar? Do they offer a clue to the meaning? Only when you have extracted as much meaning as you can from the sentence should you reach for the dictionary. This is really important in becoming adept at identifying the meaning, even when you don't know every word (which is often the case, even after years of study), and in being comfortable having an overall understanding of a piece without grasping every detail.

Reading Novels

Novels are a great source of practice material once you reach a relatively advanced level. However, even when you have reached this level be prepared not to understand a lot of it. Keep pushing through the text even if you don't understand a significant amount. It is helpful to start with simple stories that you already know, such as fairy tales or popular novels, so that you can follow the plot even if the Arabic regularly defeats you.

TUNING YOUR ARABIC ENGINE: GRAMMAR YOU CAN'T IGNORE

While Arabic grammar is complex and extensive, unless you intend to reach the highest levels of the language it is, thankfully, not necessary to master its most advanced elements. The core grammar is essential, however, as without it your communication and comprehension will remain weak. This chapter highlights several core grammatical areas that are often poorly understood by students, or simply not practiced enough, causing them ongoing problems. As you progress in your studies, pay particular attention to these areas until you fully understand them and can use them confidently.

Many other grammatical elements, including plurals, superlatives, comparatives, negation, adjective forms, participles, and the passive, to name just a few, are also important but tend to cause fewer ongoing problems and so are not highlighted here. Note that what follows is intended only to give a flavor of these areas of grammar, not to serve as a textbook. As such, I have simplified a few aspects in an attempt to convey the main points with minimal confusion. All of these areas will be covered in the course of any basic through to advanced level standard Arabic syllabus.

The Verb System

The verb system is at the heart of the language and, in the view of some Arabists, to master it is to master Arabic. A detailed discussion is far

beyond the scope of this short book; instead, highlighted here are a few areas often skated over by students despite their importance.

Verb conjugation

Manipulation of simple verbs in the past, present, and future is relatively straightforward. Practice these in all their forms until they are second nature. Beyond this lie the ‘weak’ verbs, which take either *و, ي, و*, or *ا* as one or two of the three root letters. This shakes up the usual conjugation rules and it is tempting to hope they can just be avoided. But some weak verbs are very common and need to be mastered. Identify those that recur frequently and practice until you can conjugate them with confidence: it will make your life easier later on.

Verb forms

Nearly all Arabic verbs derive from a basic verb form comprising three root letters. This is then modified according to a fixed pattern to produce up to nine related verbs. These are known as the ten forms, or measures, of the Arabic verb, a system unique to Arabic. To give an example, *سَلِمَ* (*salima*) is a basic, form one verb made up of the three root letters *س, ل, م* (s, l, m). It means ‘to be safe.’ Form two of a verb always doubles the middle root letter and often carries the meaning of doing the action to someone, or something, else. This doubling is represented by a symbol known as *shadda*, which resembles a small ‘w,’ being placed above the letter in question. In this case, the second form is *سَلَّمَ* (*sallama*), meaning ‘to save or protect’ (as well as to greet, and to hand over—both of which relate to the idea of ‘making safe’). The third form of a verb inserts the letter *alif* (ا) between the first and second root letters, and often conveys a sense of doing with someone else the action described by the form one verb. Here, we have *سَالَمَ* (*saalama*), which means ‘to make peace with.’ The series continues, producing seven more verbs, each building on the three root letters according to a regular pattern: *أَسْلَمَ, تَسَلَّمَ, اسْتَسَلَّمَ, اسْتَسَلَّمَ, اسْتَسَلَّمَ, اسْتَسَلَّمَ, اسْتَسَلَّمَ* (*aslama, tasallama, tasaalama, insalama, istalama, islamma, istaslama*). Like any set of verb forms, however, while these ten exist in theory not all are in active usage. This can look a little terrifying at first, but is in fact a valuable tool for understanding the structure of the language. Once you become

familiar with the underlying pattern new verbs are instantly recognizable as corresponding to one of the ten forms. This makes them much easier to memorize. You can also use knowledge of the pattern to predict certain nouns that are based on the verbs, and even to guess at the meaning of a new verb by recognizing the root letters within it.

The *masdar*

Related to the verb forms, the *masdar* is the equivalent of the gerund in English (nouns with an ‘-ing’ ending, such as ‘running,’ in the sense of ‘I like running’). It can also be understood as expressing the concept or idea of the verb. The *masdar* is widely used, particularly in standard Arabic, partly because Arabic verbs have no infinitive form (for example, ‘to go’ or ‘to eat’), so a sentence such as ‘I prefer to wait’ is often constructed instead as ‘I prefer waiting.’ *Masdars* appear early in any standard Arabic program and add to the burden of memorizing verbs. But the utility of the *masdar* means that the faster you can get to grips with it, the better, so dedicate time to learning the *masdars* of important verbs and practicing building sentences with them. This gets much easier once you have learned the verb forms as most forms use a regular pattern to produce the related *masdar*. For example, the *masdar* for a second form verb is constructed by adding a ‘ت’ before the first root letter, and ‘ي’ between the second and third root letters. So درّس (*darrasa*, meaning ‘he taught’) becomes تدريس (*tadrees*, meaning ‘teaching’). With practice, you can predict the *masdar* fairly reliably once you know the verb.

The *Idaafa* Construction

Arabic revolves around the *idaafa* construction. The notion of possession or belonging that is expressed in English either by using ‘of’ (as in, ‘the head of the company’) or by the possessive ‘s’ (‘the girl’s bag’) is conveyed in Arabic by placing two nouns together.

For example, the English sentence ‘the manager’s car’ would be expressed word-for-word in Arabic as ‘car the manager,’ or

سيّارة المدير – *sayyaarat (car) al-mudeer (the manager)*

An indefinite first term (car) followed by a definite second term (*the manager*) is a clear indication of an *idaafa* construction, although not the only form it can take. This tells us that the meaning translates in English as '[the] car [of] the manager' or, in other words, 'the manager's car.' To take another example, 'the student's book' (or 'the book of the student') would be rendered in Arabic as 'book the student,' or

kitaab (book) at-taalib (the student) – كتاب الطالب

At the outset this feels unnatural to the English speaker and when explained out of context can appear more difficult than it actually is. It requires plenty of practice to feel natural but with time it will become internalized and even automatic. It is important that you get the principle clear in your mind to begin with and then cement it by doing plenty of examples. Good textbooks will provide opportunities for this, as will lots of conversation practice.

Noun–Adjective Phrases: Getting the Agreement Right

Constructing basic Arabic phrases containing a noun and an adjective, such as 'the tall building' or 'the old door' is more complex than in English. In Arabic the adjective follows the noun and must agree in gender, number, and definition. In English, of course, the adjective does not vary. A further twist is that plural adjectives vary depending on whether they are describing a human or non-human noun. Human plurals take a variety of forms of adjective while non-human plurals always take an adjective in the singular feminine form.

It is important to spend time building familiarity with these basic sentence forms before moving on to more advanced work. To illustrate these rules briefly:

'Door' is a masculine noun in Arabic and so the phrase 'an old door' translates as:

baab (door) qadeem (old) – باب قديم

By contrast, 'table' is a feminine noun so 'an old table' takes the feminine form of the adjective 'old':

طاولة قديمة – *taawila (table) qadeema (old)*

Adding the definite article ‘ال’ (‘*al-*,’ meaning ‘the’) to a noun requires the adjective also to be definite. So ‘the old table’ is:

الطاولة القديمة – *at-taawila (the table) al-qadeema (‘the’ old)*

To illustrate the special rule for plurals of *non-human* objects, which take an adjective in the singular feminine form, both ‘the old doors’ (*door* being a masculine word) and ‘the old tables’ (*table* being a feminine word) take the same (feminine) adjective:

الابواب القديمة – *al-abwaab (the doors) al-qadeema (‘the’ old)*

الطاولات القديمة – *at-taawilaat (the tables) al-qadeema (‘the’ old)*

There are other elements of noun–adjective agreement but this will suffice to give a sense of this area of grammar. Don’t worry if this feels confusing at first. The point here is to highlight the importance of these core elements and the value of mastering them before moving on to more advanced areas. Accurate construction of these basic sentences is a crucial Arabic building block. Putting in the effort so that these patterns come to feel natural, and eventually automatic, will notably improve your fluency and accuracy.

Possessive Pronouns

As a concept, Arabic possessive pronouns are an easy area of grammar as they correspond simply to the English words *my, your, our, his, her, its, your (plural), and their*. But unlike English (and most other European languages), where they are placed before the noun, possessive pronouns in Arabic take the form of short suffixes:

-ي، -ك، -نا، -ه، -ها، -كم، -هم

For example, ‘house’ in Arabic is بيت (*bayt*). To say ‘our house’ you would add ‘نا’ (*na*) to the end of the word, to get بيتنا (*baytna*). Similarly,

‘name’ is اسم (*ism*), so to get ‘my name’ you add ‘ي’ (*ee*) to give اسمي (*ismee*).

As with just about any language, possessive pronouns occur extremely frequently in Arabic and, as they last for only a single syllable, you have to be quick to grasp them before the sentence moves on. This can be challenging, particularly as encountering them after the noun feels unintuitive to begin with. The key is not only to learn the rules, but to practice with lots of examples, written and spoken, to build the neural pathways until you can manage possessive pronouns without hesitation.

Prepositions and Other Connectors

Prepositions, those small words linking parts of the sentence together, are also worthy of special attention. The most frequently used Arabic prepositions include:

about	عن	<i>'an</i>
with/by	ب	<i>bi</i>
in	في	<i>fee</i>
until, in order to	حتى	<i>hatta</i>
toward/to	إلى	<i>ila</i>
on	على	<i>'ala</i>
to/belonging to	ل	<i>li</i>
with	مع	<i>ma'a</i>
about	حول	<i>hawla</i>
above	فوق	<i>fawqa</i>
under	تحت	<i>tabta</i>
against	ضد	<i>didd</i>
between	بين	<i>bayna</i>
during	خلال	<i>kbilal</i>

(Technically, some of these are not prepositions but for the purposes of this discussion we'll consider them all together.)

As with the English equivalents, the meanings can in fact vary according to the context. There are dozens more, together with a host of

connector words and phrases such as ‘however,’ ‘except,’ ‘either . . . or,’ ‘in which,’ and ‘as for.’ The existence of these linking words and phrases is of course not unique to Arabic. But amid the myriad of other challenges in learning the language it can be tempting to gloss over them. This quickly reduces comprehension of more complex sentences, however, and will limit your ability to form accurate sentences of your own. At a minimum, spend some time practicing with a good textbook or an Arabic teacher until you have a good understanding of the core prepositions and their various applications.

The Trap of Too Much Grammar

While many students suffer from a lack of core grammar, others find that despite reaching an advanced level of grammar they struggle to hold a conversation. A number of factors are behind this. Studying grammar can be more satisfying because progress is more tangible; you can study by yourself relatively easily, without any need to travel abroad; and some degree courses are heavily loaded with grammar, perhaps because it is seen as the more academic side of the language.

Advanced Arabic grammar is important if you want to be able to write well and to read complex texts, particularly of the literary variety, and if you need an advanced understanding of the language, perhaps for teaching or research reasons. Familiarity with some advanced grammar is also valuable so that you are not thrown when you see it. But overall it will make little difference to your speaking and listening as most advanced grammar is dropped entirely in colloquial conversation, and a limited amount is used even in many more formal contexts, such as professional meetings. If, like most students, you do not have endless years available to study Arabic, you need to prioritize what is genuinely important for use in your life beyond the classroom.

As a very rough indicator, grammar that you can use to formulate better sentences that enable you to express ideas you previously struggled to communicate is absolutely worth investing time in. Beyond this, there is plenty left to learn but you may wish to become more discerning as the vocabulary lists grow and the need to spend hours speaking and listening becomes ever greater.

Two areas where you may decide to limit your study to the core elements are ‘moods’ and cases (or case endings). Turning to the former, the four moods entail small adjustments to present tense verb conjugations to give a different meaning or emphasis. They are known as the indicative, jussive, subjunctive, and energetic moods. The indicative is simply what we usually refer to as the present tense and so learning it is a given. The energetic is little used in standard Arabic (and never in colloquial), but more common in classical texts, and so unlikely to be needed by most Arabic students. This leaves the jussive and subjunctive, for which it is valuable to understand the basic principles in order to avoid simple mistakes in sentence formation, and confusion when they appear in a text. For instance, the jussive has an important function as a method of past tense negation. It is formed in most cases by dropping the final vowel or consonant of the present tense conjugation. For example, the indicative mood (i.e. the ‘regular’ present tense) of ‘I study’ is:

ana adrusu – أنا أدرسُ

Here, the symbol above the final letter, a small curl known as *damma*, represents the short vowel sound ‘u.’ One way to say ‘I did not study’ is to use the particle ‘لم’ (*lam*), which indicates past tense negation:

ana lam adrus – أنا لم أدرس

The verb following the ‘لم’ needs to be in the jussive mood, which causes the final vowel to be cut. It is replaced with a symbol known as *sukoon*, indicating the absence of a vowel.

Similarly, there are some important uses of the subjunctive mood that need to be learned. The subjunctive is required after particles meaning ‘in order to’ (for instance, *لِي* and *كَيْ*) and after verbs expressing a wish or desire. For example, ‘I want to study’ is:

ana ureedu an adrusa – أنا أريدُ أن أدرسَ

Directly translated, this roughly means ‘I want that I study.’ ‘I want’ is an expression of desire and so the verb that follows it must be in the

subjunctive mood. This means that the final vowel becomes a *fatha*, a small dash above the letter representing the sound ‘a.’

This is merely the briefest of introductions to the Arabic moods. Full mastery requires lengthy study and memorization of how each is formed across the array of verb forms and types. While the common formulations highlighted above appear regularly, you will rarely make use of the jussive mood of irregular, low-frequency verbs and, in colloquial Arabic, moods are entirely dispensed with. Before dedicating a lot of time to moods beyond the core elements be clear about the expected benefit, versus spending the time on other Arabic skills.

A similar caution applies to studying case. Case affects nouns and adjectives, usually by altering the final vowel sound to reflect the role the word plays in the sentence. You will typically hear case endings pronounced in formal speech, including some news broadcasts. To illustrate how case works, here is an example of the nominative case, used when the noun is the subject of the sentence. Without case endings, ‘the house is new’ is written:

al-bayt jadeed – البيت جديد

Including case endings, this becomes:

al-baytu jadeedun – البيتُ جديدٌ

Leaving aside the adjective جديد (*jadeed*) for the sake of simplicity and focusing solely on the noun بيت (*bayt*): the *damma* above the final letter of بيت, representing the short vowel ‘u,’ shows that ‘house’ is the subject of the sentence, and that it is definite (*the* house, rather than *a* house). To compare this with an example of the accusative case, where the noun is the object of the sentence, ‘I wrote the book’ is written:

ana katabtu al-kitaaba – أنا كتبت الكتابَ

Here, the symbol above the last letter of the noun كتاب (*kitaab*), known as a *fatha*, represents the short vowel ‘a.’ It indicates that ‘book’ is the object of the verb, and that it is definite.

There is also a third case, known as the genitive. Uses of the genitive case include when the noun follows a preposition. This causes the vowel at

the end of the noun to become a short ‘i’ sound, represented by a small dash below the letter known as a *kasra*.

In written Arabic case endings are usually not shown, except in classical texts, as short vowels tend not to be written. The reader instead deduces them from the position of the word in the sentence. Pronouncing case endings while speaking Arabic requires a high degree of mastery and sounds very formal. In colloquial Arabic, case rarely features beyond the narrow function of forming certain adverbs, the use of which does not require an understanding of the broader system of case endings. As with the moods, it is important to have a basic familiarity with case so you aren’t thrown when you hear case endings attached to a word, and for the occasions where it changes the pronunciation or spelling of the word more substantially. Beyond this, be clear that studying case more thoroughly will contribute to your Arabic goals before allocating significant study time to it.

In summary, unless you have a clear need for advanced grammar don’t fall into the trap of mastering increasingly ambitious areas at the cost of neglecting speaking and listening skills. For the many students using the popular *al-Kitaab* books, you’ll have covered all you are ever likely to need by the end of *al-Kitaab* two. Before I incur the wrath of more traditional Arabists, this is not to say that there is no value in thoroughly learning moods, cases, and other advanced grammar. If you succeed, you will emerge an impressive Arabic speaker, and if you require a strong command of grammar it is clearly essential that you cover these areas thoroughly. But given the sheer breadth of the Arabic language, and the time you will need to dedicate to achieving even more modest results, it is important to be aware of the opportunity cost of what you are *not* focusing on as you contemplate jussives, subjunctives, and accusatives. As a rule of thumb, if you’re not making practical use of the grammar that you are studying, make sure you know what you’re learning it *for*. If this isn’t clear, consider spending more time practicing your conversational Arabic skills. On contact with the real world, these I guarantee you will make full use of.

FINDING THE DEEP END: ARABIC IMMERSION AND LIVING ABROAD

Students of Arabic are often recommended to undertake language immersion. In other words, time spent learning and, more importantly, using the language in an Arabic-speaking country.

This is invaluable in getting a grip on the language and making the transfer from a predominantly classroom exercise to a skill you can use to understand, and to be understood, in the real world. There is sometimes a misconception that, once in an Arabic-speaking country, the language can simply be absorbed by osmosis, the hum of Arabic in souks and coffee shops entering directly into your memory.

Unfortunately, it's not as automatic as that although there *are* clear benefits to simply being in an Arabic-speaking country. As you use the language, even in simple exchanges with shopkeepers and taxi drivers, it starts to feel real and your confidence grows. If you are taking classes while abroad, the opportunity to use what you are learning is likely to boost your motivation. You will also start to sift out the excessively formal versions of common expressions often taught in the classroom, identifying instead those that sound natural to native speakers. And you will become more comfortable living and interacting in a different cultural context, which matters if you are one day to use the language with confidence.

But there are traps to avoid while abroad if you are really serious about learning Arabic. Arabic students abroad typically find themselves living in the more international parts of the city, often sharing with other students.

This is natural enough given that these areas tend to be more accessible to foreigners. It's often easier for expats to live together because in Arab countries the local culture is typically conservative, and it is less common for young people to live together away from their families. Rented accommodation for students and expats is often advertised online, having the added advantage of being possible to arrange before arriving in the country.

The result of all this is that students of Arabic typically live together with other foreigners, with English the lingua franca outside the classroom. The social scene is largely an expat one, again with English as the common language. Depending on the city, local residents in areas frequented by expats may themselves speak a significant amount of English, being relatively affluent and well-accustomed to dealing with foreigners, again reducing the need for Arabic.

There is nothing wrong with any of this in a general sense, as expat networks allow foreigners to meet others in a similar situation, helping each another to manage the challenges of life and language abroad and often making strong friendships in the process. But the net effect on learning Arabic is that the language immersion experience can become more of a daily soak in the classroom than diving in at the deep end. Indeed, if you are not following a program of study, it is possible to live for years in Arabic-speaking countries without making any progress with Arabic. With daily study, the benefit of a generally Arab environment outside the classroom will certainly make a difference. But unless you can find ways to inject more Arabic language (and less English) into your life outside the classroom you won't progress toward fluency as quickly.

So, how to make it work? The central challenge is how to create a daily life while abroad that involves as much Arabic as possible. The rest of this chapter looks at how to do this, as well as choosing a country to study in.

Where to Study

The opportunity to practice what you learn outside the classroom is the primary reason for studying abroad. For students of colloquial Arabic, it is essential to choose the country of study carefully as the local dialect will determine the form of Arabic you learn. For students of standard Arabic the

strength of the course is arguably more important than the local dialect. But all students learn some colloquial for practical purposes and so the local dialect and level of opportunity to practice conversation outside the classroom will still play a role in the development of your Arabic.

Below is an overview of the merits of studying in different countries across the Middle East and North Africa, and of some of the well-known Arabic schools in the region. When Syria and Yemen emerge from their current conflicts they will, one hopes, again become strong centers of Arabic learning. For now, they are omitted. Please note that this list is not exhaustive and the impressions given are based on students' feedback, and are therefore snapshots at the time of writing. Different people can have very different experiences at the same school and, of course, schools change.

The Arab countries of the Levant region (Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon) are popular for learning Arabic because the local dialect is something of a mid-point between the various dialects of the Arabic-speaking world and is widely understood by Arabs elsewhere. Until the Syrian civil war, Damascus was the top choice. English is not widely spoken by Syrians, and the country's Arabic language schools had a strong reputation. Jordan is probably now the most popular destination. Well-reputed schools in Amman include MALIC (Modern Arabic Language International Center), which offers affordable private and small group instruction; Qasid, strong on standard Arabic; the Institut Français, known for its colloquial classes; and Berlitz, whose strong speaking and listening focus works well for some students. In Palestine, Birzeit University, near Ramallah, is a popular option and offers a well-structured program. Beirut is well liked by Arabic students, often as much for its party scene as for its linguistic opportunities. The downside is that Lebanese people often speak both English and French, which means you have to work harder to find opportunities to practice Arabic. Well-reputed schools include Saifi, which specializes in colloquial Arabic, the Institut Français, and ALPS (The Academy of Languages and Practical Skills).

The Gulf countries as a whole are less popular for learning Arabic as high numbers of non-Arabic speaking migrant workers mean that opportunities to interact with native Arabic speakers can be limited. Oman has a number of established Arabic schools. These include Sultan Qaboos College, which teaches standard Arabic and has a good reputation although

is rather isolated in the country's interior. Gulf Arabic Programme focuses on colloquial Arabic and is located to the north near the Emirati border.

In North Africa, many students choose Egypt. The distinct Egyptian dialect requires some adaptation for use elsewhere but is at least widely understood—although not spoken—in other Arab countries due to the influence of Egyptian film and television. There are many schools in Cairo and the most popular include the standard-Arabic-focused Arab Academy, Kalimat, the Institut Français, which enjoys a good reputation for colloquial Arabic, and the American University in Cairo and the International Language Institute, both of which have positive reputations but are at the more expensive end of the scale. There are also a number of Arabic schools in both Morocco and Tunisia, although the local dialects are not well understood outside North Africa, being very different to standard Arabic and strongly influenced by French and other languages. In Morocco, popular schools in Fez include Alif, which has a particularly good reputation, and Subul Assalam; and Qalam wa Lawh Center for Arabic Studies in Rabat. In Tunisia, the Bourguiba Institute is among the most well-known, with a positive reputation and a focus on standard Arabic, along with the Centre Sidi Bou Said.

In general, if the option exists, consider an Arabic school outside the capital city. Your choices will be fewer but as there is usually much less English spoken in provincial towns, and you are further from the expat social scene, you can expect a much higher level of Arabic immersion. As it is hard to know how good a school is really going to be until you get there, it is valuable to have access to some up-to-date 'ground truth.' For example, by connecting with another Arabic student who has studied in the institution you are considering, or even in the same city, and getting their take on local reputations. In any event, it is preferable to avoid paying for a long course up front if you can avoid it. It is easy to gather other students' impressions of local Arabic institutions once you arrive and, if your school isn't all you had hoped for, you may in time decide to try somewhere different.

Accommodation

It is worth researching the areas of the city you want to live in. Residential areas popular with westerners are often in wealthier parts of town. These can sometimes be a bit too international from an Arabic language point of

view, with locals accustomed to speaking to foreigners in English. You will often find less English spoken in more traditional parts of the city, which may also have more of a community feel with many independent shops and markets, all of which is conducive to practicing your Arabic.

Some short-term language programs will sometimes arrange accommodation as part of the deal. Otherwise, renting a room is most common. Finding somewhere with other foreigners is easiest, and most likely to connect you to the expat social scene. But if you can find a way to share with some local guys or girls it could be hugely beneficial for your Arabic. This might require a reasonable level of Arabic, or at least considerable perseverance, to arrange but will pay dividends in the long run.

The other option is a homestay, or living with a family. The conservative culture of much of the Middle East means opportunities to live with families can be limited. This is particularly the case with male guests due to sensitivities around Muslim women being alone with men outside the immediate family and, for veiled women, the need to wear a headscarf in their presence. Nonetheless, it is still possible to arrange homestays for both male and female students. Christian families, for instance, may have fewer religious sensitivities to such an arrangement. Language schools may be able to help arrange a homestay and you should ask about this in advance if you are interested.

Before committing to a homestay try to find out about the family's daily routine. Will you be eating with the family each evening, for instance, and are there likely to be family excursions or other activities you could join? During a homestay in Amman, I found myself eating a reheated dinner alone many evenings after returning from classes, the family having already had their main meal at lunchtime—not the round-the-dinner table experience I'd pictured! The language school may be able to provide feedback from past students who have stayed with particular families. As far as possible, try to get a sense of whether you're going to be surrounded by Arabic conversation as part of the family, or really just renting a room.

It is worth considering the stage at which your Arabic will benefit most from a homestay. Given that conversation in the home is conducted in colloquial Arabic, it may be a struggle if your studies have been heavily focused on standard Arabic, or if you have minimal knowledge of Arabic as a whole. The time spent being around native speakers might still provide a

useful first step toward speaking colloquial Arabic but the benefit may be more limited. An ability to hold simple conversations, including some colloquial Arabic, will put you in a position to practice what you know rather than simply feeling lost.

Despite the benefits, most Arabic students don't pursue a homestay option. This is partly due to the additional challenge of arranging one, but also because there is simply a lot of fun to be had living abroad, learning Arabic, and spending time with others doing the same. Moving in with a family can significantly reduce your independence, depending how far you are required to fit in with the household routine. And doing it properly really means spending your evenings at home with your hosts, preferably speaking as much Arabic as possible, rather than meeting up with newfound friends. It comes down to your priorities and what you're prepared to give up in your bid to improve your Arabic.

Activities While Abroad

Any activities you can find that provide opportunities to use Arabic will help strengthen your grip on the language, as well as open up possibilities for friendships in Arabic. This isn't always straightforward as a lack of fluency to begin with can limit what you are able to get involved with. But with some creativity and persistence opportunities are available. Most obviously, and strongly recommended, are language exchanges (discussed in chapter 2). These have the advantage of not requiring that you speak strong Arabic to participate and provide a low-pressure environment in which to build confidence with a native speaker. It is also a route to forming friendships with local people that are conducted at least partly in Arabic, something which can otherwise be challenging until you reach a higher level of fluency.

Beyond this, you'll need to think creatively, ask around and be prepared to try things out. Not all your effort will result in valuable Arabic practice but, if nothing else, you're likely to learn something new about your host city and its people. Sports groups are one example. If you're religious, attending a mosque or church and associated groups can provide opportunities to get to know people. Common interests such as cooking or watching sports are ways to maintain contact with new acquaintances. You might also find interest groups—from photography to dance—to join.

Volunteering is a good source of possibilities. Some work will require more advanced Arabic, but activities like helping out with a food redistribution charity or putting on simple games for children, require little more than elbow grease and some enthusiasm. Finally, there is a time-tested method of improving in any language: finding a local boyfriend or girlfriend. One would hope that language advancement was not the only motive for pursuing a relationship, of course, but the fact remains that the regular practice with a native speaker that a relationship provides can be a highly effective way to build fluency.

Final Thoughts on Living Abroad

Spending time in an Arabic-speaking country is often the key to reaching fluency. More important than just being in the country, however, is how you spend your time while you're there. Putting yourself into situations where you are forced to use the Arabic you have learned requires regularly stepping outside your comfort zone, particularly if you decide to limit your time in expat circles in favor of more Arab environments. The more you manage to do this, the more quickly you will progress through the discomfort zone to a point where you can engage comfortably and with growing confidence in Arabic. And as you do this, your efforts to speak to Arabs in Arabic will invariably be received warmly with generous praise of your language skills offered in return, no matter how warped your pronunciation or corrupt your grammar. Arabs generally recognize that their language is difficult (even native speakers spend years studying standard Arabic in school) and so efforts to speak in Arabic are usually met with much approval.

SPEAKING LIKE A LOCAL: HOW TO GET *REALLY* GOOD

There are plenty of good reasons to aim for a basic level of Arabic without worrying about reaching a high level of fluency: smoothing the way when traveling in the Arab world, for example, building goodwill in professional relationships, or gaining an insight into one of the world's most fascinating languages. But if your aim is a more advanced level, whether in standard Arabic for professional use, social conversation, or otherwise, this advice will help you calibrate your plans.

Forget Perfection—and Be Selective with Your Goals

A reality check: you are unlikely ever to master Arabic—or even to come close—unless you devote many years to the endeavor, studying and living in an Arabic-speaking country, wholly immersed in the language. A truly qualified Arabist would have a strong command of not only standard Arabic but at least one dialect. This is unrealistic for most people, and every Arabic student needs to make their peace with this. Rather than aim for the vague target of fluency, a more meaningful goal (and one you may not just reach, but surpass) is communicating with confidence *in the areas of the language that matter to you*. As you reach B2 level and beyond, focus on the Arabic for the contexts in which *you* want to be able to operate. For example, managing a business meeting, conducting a research interview, conversing with your husband or wife's family, or chatting with friends. The Arabic

required for these scenarios is not entirely different, of course, but the standard–colloquial distinction will make a crucial difference, and the vocabulary will vary significantly. This might sound unambitious: if one was learning French or Spanish, for example, then fluency in the language would cover all the above scenarios. With time, this also applies to Arabic, but in practice so few students achieve an advanced level in diverse subject areas, let alone straddling the standard–colloquial divide, that maintaining a narrower focus is more likely to result in you achieving your goals. If you do achieve the level you want in this area, great: you can expand from there.

The Study Base

A strong study base is a must. It is rare that someone reaches an advanced level of Arabic as a non-native speaker without pursuing serious studies at some stage, or exposure to the basics as a child. This is particularly true with standard Arabic, as a firm grasp of the rules and structures is essential and opportunities to practice outside the classroom are more limited. This might mean a university degree focused partly or wholly on the Arabic language; intensive training such as that offered by some diplomatic services; an extended sabbatical from working life dedicated to study; or part-time study over an extended period. Colloquial Arabic relies less on formal instruction as it is the language of daily life, and so offers greater opportunity for informal learning. The fastest route to strong Arabic is nonetheless likely to include a considerable amount of study, building vocabulary, and learning the rules and patterns that form the base of the language.

Extensive Real-world Practice

Formal study by itself is usually insufficient to reach the higher levels of Arabic. Classroom study is like the theory test before a driving exam. To really know a language you have to get out there and put in the hours on the road. Even those with Arabic degrees will not always be able to engage effectively in more complex conversation. Many degrees are combinations of Arabic language and subjects such as Islamic or Middle Eastern studies so the language component comprises only part of the course content.

Graduates are typically strong in grammar, reading, and writing, with a wide vocabulary accumulated over several years, but may require more real-world practice to obtain strong speaking and listening skills. An exception is students of interpreting degrees. These courses have an intense focus on the core skills of speaking and listening and can provide a route to advanced skills approaching native-speaker level. Translation degrees contain similarly intensive Arabic language content, although the focus is of course on written material.

Whatever the approach taken, formal study alone is unlikely to result in strong fluency. Reaching a confident C1 level, and certainly moving toward C2, requires extensive practical use of the language, alongside ongoing work to expand vocabulary. You are unlikely to achieve this without spending long periods of time in an Arabic-speaking country. But being in the country is not enough: the key is finding ways to engage in as much real-world Arabic conversation as possible. The jump from intermediate to advanced has a lot to do simply with the quantity of Arabic your brain is processing. The challenge at this level is to find a daily routine that provides enough substantial Arabic interaction. Snippets of conversation with taxi drivers, waiters, and shopkeepers are insufficient to make this kind of progress. This may mean making some sacrifices, particularly to your regular social life. The small number of Arabic students who reach the most advanced levels have often spent extended time far from the expat scene, for example, living with a family on the non-westernized side of the city or teaching English in a remote town. You may also find ways to accumulate the hours of practice through a mixture of activities, for instance, making friends with native speakers, living with a local family, meeting multiple Arabic-speaking partners, and using Arabic regularly at work. However you approach it, the aim is multiple hours per day over several months. The more hours per day your brain spends functioning in Arabic, the better.

Ignore the Doubts and Keep Going

Almost every student experiences frustrating periods when they feel they aren't progressing. After B1 level, in particular, progress typically feels slower. Study at this stage moves beyond the essential vocabulary and core grammatical structures that immediately reward the student with access to

new topics and more interesting sentence structures. Instead, the focus is on the slower grind of steadily widening vocabulary and building up hours of practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing. From day to day, and even week to week, progress may not be apparent as the sheer breadth of the language reveals itself.

At this stage it is important to acknowledge the frustration, accept it as normal, and press on regardless. As long as you are steadily building vocabulary and practicing the core skills you will continue to improve. When you look back after a month or two this will be clearer than it often is at the time. But don't forget the obvious. Your speaking and listening won't improve by doing grammar exercises or reading newspaper articles. It is important by this stage to have the resources in place to allow sufficient practice in the right skill areas.

Manage Your Breaks to Aid Vocabulary Retention

Most Arabic students will confirm that the language is slowly learned and quickly forgotten. Arabic typically departs the memories of native English-speakers more rapidly than easier, European languages, perhaps because the Arabic letters and structures have little connection to other linguistic material held in the memory, making them harder to lock into place. This becomes less acute as your Arabic advances, and as years of use embed the language more firmly in your memory, but remains a challenge. Accepting this, and working with it, can help you manage it.

Even short breaks from intensive study—a week's holiday, for instance—can have a negative effect although this is quickly reversed once you resume study. Taking periodic breaks from intensive study courses is important to remain fresh and motivated (and sane). There is also some evidence that, after a period of intense study, the brain continues to work on the material during the break, with improved performance once the student moves beyond the initial rusty period on return. If possible, avoid long periods away from Arabic while you are learning, as you will end up with a lot that you need to relearn. When gaps in learning are unavoidable it is worth setting aside time periodically to keep the Arabic wheels in your brain turning over. The odd hour spent revising vocabulary, reading a newspaper article, or taking part in a language exchange pays off when you resume studying.

You can also plan your study ahead of a break to reduce the amount that you forget. Picture three concentric circles: first, a central core of words that you have firmly memorized through extensive use and are unlikely to forget. Then a circle of vocabulary around this that you have used significantly and is fairly secure in your memory. Finally, an outer circle of peripheral vocabulary that you have studied once or twice but needs more revision and usage to be retained. During breaks, it is new vocabulary in the outer band that is likely to be quickly forgotten. So it is a better use of effort ahead of a break to review and consolidate vocabulary that you already know reasonably well (the middle band) than to take on new words (the outer band).

The Invisible Threshold

There is a point beyond which you can use Arabic routinely in social and/or professional situations, taking advantage of all the real-world practice this offers. But until this is reached it may remain impractical to deal effectively with business contacts in Arabic, for example, or to conduct interviews without a translator, or build a network of Arabic-speaking friends. Frustratingly, this can make it feel like a range of rich opportunities for real-world practice is close but still inaccessible.

The challenge is how to move past this threshold. Here, every little helps. As you come close to being able to conduct more complex Arabic interactions, find ways to do as much as you can. For instance, if you can hold a discussion partly in Arabic before turning to English or a translator for more difficult sections, you will gradually improve, particularly if you push yourself to go a bit further each time. If you know you'll be discussing a particular topic in an upcoming social or professional situation, try revising the vocabulary beforehand to help the conversation run smoothly. Even if you move onto harder topics later in the conversation, you'll have one more successful complex interaction under your belt. Make use, too, of friends and colleagues who are willing to support you to shift your regular conversation into Arabic, perhaps by using the register that you are most comfortable with. Even if you do this only part of the time, it will help you move toward the threshold beyond which you will lose the need for others to make significant adjustments for you. Finally, accept that despite having reached a relatively advanced level of Arabic for a non-native speaker, you

are still moving through the pain barrier of learning a language. Holding a lengthy professional discussion where you fail to understand significant sections is uncomfortable and frustrating. But as long as you can identify and ask for clarification of the important bits, and grasp enough by the end to avoid any disastrous outcomes, accept this imperfect interaction as part of the learning curve. It will not be like this forever: every tough conversation will improve your speaking and listening. It gets easier, and you'll find yourself able to look back and see how much further you have progressed.

Context and Register

The context in which you are using Arabic will affect how your language develops, so give some brief thought to aligning the practice you are getting to the kind of Arabic you want. If you are spending a lot of time speaking with a host family, for example, your colloquial Arabic will strengthen. Conversely, if you have regular professional meetings in particularly formal environments, you may reinforce something close to standard Arabic. If maintaining a clear distinction between the formal and informal registers is important for you (for example, if you need to translate into standard Arabic), you will need to find a way to keep both forms fresh, perhaps through speaking classes that focus on one at a time. For most students this is not a priority and engaging the Arabic part of the brain in any way is likely to be beneficial for your listening, speaking, and confidence, even if that means blurring the line between standard and colloquial.

Bear in mind that most people who have learned Arabic to an advanced level are not able to switch cleanly between registers, and that this usually doesn't matter. You can get by effectively using an amalgam of standard and colloquial Arabic, shifting vocabulary and structures slightly as the context requires. While this won't make you sound like a native speaker, it is an entirely valid and more achievable goal than seeking pure forms of both standard and colloquial.

THE WORLD OF WORK: ARABIC AS A PROFESSIONAL SKILL

How can Arabic be used professionally? As with languages more generally, knowledge of Arabic is rarely the sole requirement for a job, but one among many. For roles appropriate for non-native speakers, Arabic is likely not to be the primary working language but required for certain elements of the job. Proficiency of around C1 level is typically necessary for this kind of role but B1 to B2 level will suffice in some cases. This is in contrast to working in an organization where Arabic is the sole language of communication and native-level fluency (C2 level) is a basic requirement of employment, a level which few non-native speakers attain.

Below C1 level, the student may be reasonably competent in a controlled classroom environment but is likely to struggle to conduct substantial business in Arabic independently. Reaching C1 level is a major accomplishment, meaning that the linguistic threshold to cross before professional opportunities begin to multiply is high, something aspiring Arabic students should keep in mind.

A challenge Arabic students face is that English is widely studied in many Arab countries, meaning that there is no shortage of well-qualified Arabs speaking both Arabic and excellent English. Nonetheless, there are many opportunities to use Arabic in a professional context. Ability in both standard and colloquial Arabic is often preferable, although a hybrid of the two is common and usually perfectly acceptable, and the need for one or the

other will vary between jobs. Below is an overview of the most common professional areas where Arabic can be used.

Development and humanitarian work with international nongovernmental organizations

Examples of roles that might require Arabic include fieldwork to design and implement projects to support local communities, to develop infrastructure, or undertake research. Typically, Arabic is useful but not essential. The diverse nationalities of staff in the international development and humanitarian cadre means that English is the usual lingua franca for interactions between organizations and with donor bodies such as governments and the UN. Roles that require extensive use of Arabic, such as interacting with the recipients of support or with local authorities, are typically filled by native-speaker staff and interpreters can be used to bridge language gaps. Nonetheless, a good level of Arabic can bring valuable benefits in building relationships and understanding the needs of those you are supporting, and may significantly strengthen your suitability for certain positions. Colloquial Arabic is most appropriate for speaking to local aid recipients, and something approaching standard Arabic would also be suitable in exchanges with local officials.

Research

Support is often provided by translators, but this is not always practical or affordable and so Arabic skills can be essential, whether speaking with government bodies, independent organizations, or local communities. The form of Arabic required depends on the kind of research. Standard and colloquial Arabic are both likely to be valuable in engagement with government officials, for example, whereas local people in an informal environment are likely to use colloquial Arabic. Even where Arabic is not strictly necessary, because of translation support or otherwise, a basic knowledge of the language can really help in building rapport, gaining the cooperation of officials, and smoothing the research process.

Translation and interpreting

This requires a high level of ability, and specialist training or a dedicated degree is likely to be needed. Nonetheless, organizations sometimes employ nonprofessional translators who are fluent enough to get the job done. Such

roles are very often filled by native Arabic speakers who speak strong English, but some positions will require native English speakers.

Diplomacy

Some foreign ministries will select people for their language skills, while others provide language training as required. If you are considering developing your Arabic skills for this reason, find out first what weighting language skills are given in the application process. On the job, many embassy positions do not require Arabic, as locally employed staff are often relied on to interact with local authorities. But there is typically a core of politically focused roles where the ability to speak Arabic with a range of contacts is useful, if not essential. Standard Arabic is generally useful for diplomatic roles although less formal meetings, for instance with local community figures, may require colloquial Arabic.

International business

Large Arab companies conduct their international business more and more in English. Some knowledge of Arabic will go down well, as exchanging greetings and other pleasantries can create a great impression, and more advanced skills will allow an insight into local culture and attitudes. But Arabic is not strictly necessary for pursuing business in most Middle East markets. It is unusual to meet an Arab business person who does not speak at least reasonable English, and many prefer to converse in English.

Small business and entrepreneurship

For those with aspirations to launch a start-up or local business in the Arab world, unless you are in a sector that is strongly focused on expats or the international market you are likely to be operating in a wholly local environment, which means that strong Arabic will be essential to building relations and managing day-to-day affairs. Strong colloquial Arabic is likely to be most useful, ideally with some knowledge of standard Arabic.

Consultant expert

Many organizations, including NGOs, embassies, and businesses, employ experts and trainers on short-term contracts where Arabic may also be required. There are roles in diverse fields including project management, conflict advisers, field researchers, and humanitarian experts. The

requirement for Arabic very much depends on the particular role. Strong Arabic skills may be merely a nice-to-have, or they may be essential, depending on whom you will be engaging with day to day. Both colloquial and some standard Arabic may be required, depending on the specifics of the job.

Journalism

You don't have to speak strong Arabic to work effectively as a journalist in the Arab world at an English-language publication but it can really help. It may be essential for news agency staff who need to respond to breaking stories, draw on Arabic news sources, and check with local contacts. Freelancers are likely to need at least a reasonable level of Arabic in order to go out and get stories, unless they have the resources to pay interpreters. For correspondents, Arabic remains valuable but is less essential because news organizations will usually provide local translators and fixers. Television reporting is further removed from 'frontline' engagement and so Arabic is typically less necessary. Whatever the formal requirement, if you can speak the language you will almost certainly be able to understand the country better and to report with greater insight.

Common European Framework of Reference Table

	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently, and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
Proficient User	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic, and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors, and cohesive devices.
	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint

		on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
Independent User	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise while traveling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions, and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment, and matters in areas of immediate need.
Basic User	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows, and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way, provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Credit: © Council of Europe. Reproduced with the permission of the Council of Europe. From *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (2001), Council of Europe, Cambridge University Press, p. 24, Table 1: Common Reference Levels: global scale.

Table of Contents

[Half Title Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Contents](#)

[Acknowledge](#)

[Intro](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Common European](#)