

Rethinking Arabic alphabet instruction: A comparative study of learning strategies for non-native speakers

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Abstract

This research explores methods of instruction and learning of the Arabic alphabet for non-native speakers at the university level. It is based on the comparative study and quantitative analysis of the existing methods presented in Alif Baa: Introduction to Arabic Letters and Sounds; ‘Arabiyyat al-Naas, Part I, First Edition; Arabic for Life: A Textbook for Beginning Arabic; Ahlan wa Sahlan: Functional Modern Standard Arabic for Beginners; and Mastering Arabic, alongside an innovative approach in the “Arabic for Beginners” online course developed by the lead author. The authors argue that using a multisensory method, such as the one adopted in the lead author’s “Arabic for Beginners” course, would yield better results in students’ recognition and production of the alphabet. Current methods largely rely on English transliteration to teach the Arabic alphabet. This creates its own challenges for learners, especially in pronouncing letters without direct English equivalents. In contrast, the “Arabic for Beginners” e-course follows a new approach based on introducing letters without transliteration or English translation. Instead, this method follows a “Listen, Watch, Mimic, Repeat, and Produce” model. It relies on images, voice recordings, and associated words to promote a method of learning which more closely replicates the natural learning process of the first language. The objective of this study is to improve upon current instruction models so that non-native speakers may benefit from better teaching and learning practices. The study uses a quantitative approach to assess the effectiveness of current teaching methods through surveys conducted with a total of 84 university students enrolled in Arabic language courses. Ultimately, this article contributes to ongoing efforts to improve Arabic language acquisition by presenting models for multisensory

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learning that immerse students in the physical act of producing Arabic letters and sounds rather than merely memorizing them.

Keywords alphabet, Arabic language learners, English transliteration and translation, multisensory approach, multisensory learning, teaching approaches

1. Introduction

Teaching the Arabic alphabet to non-native speakers at the university level presents unique challenges due to the nature of the language and its script. First, there is the diglossic nature of Arabic and its coexistence of formal and colloquial varieties. Additionally, for learners who speak English as a first language or are otherwise studying Arabic from the standpoint of English, there is the absence of equivalent phonemes in English. These challenges lead to difficulties in pronunciation, comprehension, and retention. Furthermore, distinctive features of the Arabic script, such as the connected forms of letters and their variations, create barriers to literacy as students learn to read and write. This article proposes a new, multisensory teaching methodology to address these challenges and to improve learners' ability to internalize and accurately produce Arabic sounds.

Traditional approaches to teaching Arabic as a foreign language can be largely categorized into two methods: communicative and grammar-focused. Communicative methods, such as the Direct Method and the Communicative Approach, emphasize real-life language use and interaction. Grammar-focused methods, including the Grammar-Translation and Phonetic Methods, prioritize structural understanding and accurate pronunciation. Integrated and eclectic approaches aim to balance these two methods of instruction.

Leading textbooks in the field—such as *Alif Baa*, *'Arabiyyat al-Naas*, *Arabic for Life*, *Ahlan Wa Sahlan*, and *Mastering Arabic*—reflect these methods by incorporating transliteration and English translation as the basis of their Arabic alphabet instruction. However, this reliance on transliteration with English-centered phonemes often proves inadequate at fully and effectively teaching the sounds and letters of the Arabic alphabet, especially when teaching letters which do not have equivalent phonemes in English. This can lead to persistent errors in pronunciation and learner frustration.

This research proposes that a new approach to Arabic language instruction is needed that prioritizes phonetic precision and learner engagement. It hypothesizes that excluding transliteration and translation, while also pursuing a multisensory approach can better facilitate the learning of Arabic phonemes. Such an approach seeks to replicate the natural processes of first-language acquisition, enabling learners to internalize the sounds of the target language more effectively.

The study evaluates current teaching methods and leading textbooks while comparing them critically to the lead author's new proposed teaching approach. Through this critical analysis, the research addresses shortcomings in current methods and offers solutions. It also situates itself in current larger

global educational and linguistic trends, including the growing role of technology in learning and the need for culturally sensitive teaching practices.

1.1. Literature Review

The method of alphabet instruction in five leading Arabic textbooks will be examined in this review. These textbooks are: *Alif Baa: Introduction to Arabic Letters and Sounds* by Kristen Brustad, Mahmoud Al-Batal, and Abbas Al-Tonsi (2019); *‘Arabiyyat al-Naas, Part I* (First Edition) by Munther Younes, Makda Weatherspoon, and Maha Saliba Foster (2015); *Arabic for Life: A Textbook for Beginning Arabic* by Bassam Frangieh (2012); *Ahlan wa Sahlan: Functional Modern Standard Arabic for Beginners* by Mahdi Alesh and Allen Clark (2010); and *Mastering Arabic* by Jane Wightwick and Mahmoud Gaafar (2024). All five of these textbooks rely on or make use of transliteration with the English alphabet (its letters and phonemes) combined with language exercises to teach the Arabic alphabet. While these textbooks have had success in teaching Arabic as a foreign language, this study is concerned with their success in teaching the Arabic alphabet and the proper pronunciation of its letters. By using English transliterations as the basis for teaching the Arabic alphabet, these texts struggle to fully and effectively teach Arabic letters which lack direct English equivalents, such as ع (*‘ayn*), غ (*Ghayn*), ح (*Haa*), خ (*Khaa*), ص (*Saad*), ض (*Daad*), ط (*Taa*), ظ (*DHaa*), and ق (*Qa*). In response to this gap, authors often provide examples using the closest English sounds or, occasionally, sounds from other languages, such as German. This reliance on English or other European languages, however, leads to persistent pronunciation difficulties for learners.

Each of the five textbooks mentioned above follow one (or a combination) of three different approaches to foreign language education: the communicative approach, the grammar-based approach, and the proficiency approach. Younes et al. (2015), Brustad et al. (2019), Alesh and Clark (2010), and Wightwick and Gaafar (2024) followed the communicative approach, while Frangieh (2012) utilized a balance of the proficiency-focused and grammar-based methods.

The communicative approach has been widely adopted in Arabic instruction. It prioritizes students using the target language to engage in real-life situations to express their thoughts, to interact with others, and to convey ideas. This method “centers around developing full communicative competencies rather than specific targeted grammatical competencies” (Ryding, 2013, p. 59). Having developed as a response to the limitations of earlier grammar- and translation-based methods (Ajape et al., 2023), the communicative approach emphasizes a student-centered learning experience to build learners’ confidence and fluency.

By contrast, the grammar-based approach focuses on the rules and structures of Arabic. It follows the “systematic study of grammar, while language was codified and arranged into fixed rules learnt by heart” (Facchin, 2019, p. 253).

The proficiency approach does not prescribe a specific teaching method but instead emphasizes the outcomes of instruction over the process itself (Heath, 1990). This approach prioritizes the development of students’ communicative skills, enabling them to use the language effectively in

everyday situations. It focuses on acquiring practical language skills over possessing theoretical knowledge about the language.

Each of these teaching approaches can be seen in the popular textbooks for Arabic instruction mentioned above. Closer examination of these textbooks and the teaching approaches they employ reveals how these strategies and techniques are used to teach the Arabic alphabet. Brustad et al. (2019) introduced the Arabic letters across 10 units. The authors asserted that “*Alif Baa* aims to help students master Arabic pronunciation, letter writing, and foundational conversational skills” (p. VII). Unit One provides an overview of the Arabic language, including the transliteration system used in the book to introduce letters. The text highlights the “enhanced significance of the transliteration system to facilitate vocabulary acquisition based on functionality rather than spelling, wherein many words are introduced for active learning before Arabic script is utilized” (p. X).

In *Alif Baa*, the transliteration system, introduced in unit one, serves as the primary reference for students to learn all the letters in the Arabic alphabet. Units two through eight introduce the letters gradually in groups of four or five letters. Each letter is accompanied by Arabic vocabulary to provide greater context and examples of the letter’s pronunciation and written form. Both the pronunciation and written forms of each letter are taught, supplemented by listening drills to reinforce reading and writing techniques. Additionally, the book includes a website and a DVD that provide extra exercises and audio recordings to guide letter learning.

However, the selection of corresponding vocabulary which accompanies the letter instruction is arbitrary, with some words being uncommon in everyday communication, such as *bakh* (بَاخ, colorless) and *khadda* (خَضَّن, to shake lightly). While this vocabulary can be used to demonstrate phonemes and pronunciation in context, it does not have meaningful or functional significance for learners at this stage in their Arabic instruction.

Additionally, visual aids are minimal, offering limited support in the learning process. For letters lacking English equivalents, the transliteration symbol table presented in unit one of the textbook is essential, along with the audio recordings provided for each letter. For instance, symbols such as “Kh” for خ may be unclear for students unfamiliar with German or Hebrew pronunciation conventions. Similarly, the symbol “c” for ع (*‘ayn*) lacks clarity in assisting learners with proper pronunciation without audio guidance. Furthermore, the audio recordings are not practical to use as learners need to juggle between the textbook and the companion website or DVD to access them.

Students primarily rely on audio recordings, drills, and teacher instruction to learn these letters, focusing on listening, repetition, and production for proficiency. Given the importance of repetition and memorization in the learning process, transliteration adds another layer of complexity for students. Not only must they learn and memorize the Arabic symbols, but they must also memorize a set of symbols in English corresponding to the Arabic alphabet. Furthermore, transliterations of Arabic letters which lack equivalencies in English may be difficult to interpret. Alternatively, adopting a more organic and Arabic-centered approach may ease the learning burden for students by directing them back to early, deeply

embedded learning habits and encouraging them to use well-developed, though often forgotten, skills.

Younes et al.'s (2015) work in the first edition of *'Arabiyyat Al-Naas, Part I*, offers an introduction to the Arabic letters on the website accompanying the textbook. The letters are presented over nine lessons throughout the textbook, with a review in lesson ten. Each lesson introduces a group of letters, typically ranging from three to nine, along with their corresponding symbols or sounds in English. Additionally, each lesson includes a set of words, usually up to five or six, though sometimes as many as twelve, to reinforce letter recognition and pronunciation. For example, in the unit where students learn ξ ('ayn) and ξ (ghayn), orthographic and phonetic instruction is supported by vocabulary words such as صغير (*ṣaghīr*, small) and العراق (*al-'Irāq*, Iraq). These words often revolve around themes such as Arab countries and cities, directions, days of the week, months of the year, and greetings, spanning the first seven lessons. Lessons Eight and Nine recycle previously introduced words. Images accompany the words for visual reinforcement, while audio recordings on the website and DVD assist with pronunciation.

For letters without English equivalents, the authors use the closest corresponding English letters or use other symbols to represent the Arabic phoneme. This guidance is provided only in Lesson 10, not in each lesson. For example, the letter ξ ('ayn) is paired with the symbol "(,*)." However, this symbol does not necessarily help students pronounce the letter ξ ('ayn) correctly, as it does not represent a sound in English. Students must make use of additional audio recordings, explanations, and repeated practice under the instruction of an Arabic teacher to achieve correct pronunciation of the letter. Even the use of the word "Iraq" as a vocabulary term to teach pronunciation is not ideal, since in English, the letter ξ ('ayn) corresponds to the sound (i), whereas the sound (äa) (ξ) does not exist. Furthermore, in the United States, the common mispronunciation of the country name "Iraq" as "eye-rack," rather than the intended "Irāq," can also inhibit students from achieving proper pronunciation of the letter ξ ('ayn). Therefore, relying solely on transliteration symbols is insufficient for accurate pronunciation, as evidenced by students' difficulty in pronouncing "Iraq" correctly. Similarly, introducing the letter ξ (ghayn) with the transliteration symbol "(gh)" risks confusion, as it may lead to a mispronunciation resembling the English "g" sound, as in "ghost."

Furthermore, inconsistencies in transliteration symbols further complicate the learning process for students. This is especially true for emphatic letters such as ص (*Saad*), ض (*Daad*), ط (*Taa*), and ظ (*DHaa*). While some symbols are presented in English (e.g., emphatic T and S for ط (*Taa*) and ص (*Saad*)). Others are presented in Arabic (e.g., emphatic ڍ (*daal*) and ڏ (*dhaal*) for ض (*Daad*) and ظ (*DHaa*)). This inconsistency in the introduction of transliteration symbols, alternating between Arabic and English, can lead to confusion among learners.

Younes et al. (2015) defined these emphatic letters as having a "thicker or deeper sound compared to their non-emphatic counterparts" (p. 9). While this definition may be helpful, the extent of its effectiveness in fostering correct pronunciation remains unclear. The authors direct students to the audio

recordings in Lesson Nine for guidance on proper pronunciation, showing the importance of auditory learning while not necessarily facilitating it effectively.

In his textbook, *Arabic for Life: A Textbook for Beginning Arabic*, Bassam Frangieh (2012) employed a developmental-skills approach to teach listening comprehension, reading, writing, and speaking to beginners. Frangieh sought a balance between proficiency- and grammar-oriented approaches while providing a background in Arabic phonology, morphology, and syntax (p. XV). The introduction to the Arabic alphabet begins in section one and continues over ten lessons. It starts with an overview of the alphabet, including a chart of the letters accompanied by audio recordings, a rendition of the Arabic alphabet song by a student, and the alphabet table presented in its traditional sequence.

Each letter is presented in its original, separated form and various connected shapes, along with calligraphic representations. Frangieh used English transliterations to represent the sound of each letter, such as equating the letter ب with the English letter “b.” Random words and phrases are incorporated into listening drills to practice accurate pronunciation of each letter. For Arabic letters lacking English equivalents, Frangieh provided the closest equivalent in English or, occasionally, other languages, along with explanations of their articulation. For instance, he explained that “the letter خ (*kha*) is akin to the German ‘ch’ as in Bach, formed in the uvula and back of the tongue” (p. 26). Regarding the letters ص (*Saad*), ض (*Daad*), ط (*Taa*), and ظ (*DHaa*), Frangieh noted that these are emphatic equivalents of س (*seen*), د (*daal*), ت (*taa*), and ذ (*dhaal*) respectively. For the letter غ (*ghayn*), Frangieh described it as “having no English equivalent, likening its sound to gargling when produced” (p. 53).

Arabic for Life: A Textbook for Beginning Arabic (Frangieh, 2012) assures students that they will learn to read and write all the letters through the drills and exercises provided in the textbook, supplemented by the accompanying DVD for additional practice and repetition.

In *Ahlan wa Sahlan: Functional Modern Standard Arabic for Beginners*, Alish and Clark (2010) introduced the letters across six units, grouping them into one-way connectors, two-way connectors, and letters with similar shapes. They provided a table of sounds, English transliterations, and sound examples in English. For letters without English equivalents, Alish and Clark provided a brief phonetic background. They also included a figure titled “Organs of Speech” to show the anatomy of speech and the points of articulation to better explain correct pronunciation. The transliteration symbols for letters lacking English equivalents are as follows:

خ (k), ح (h), ع (‘), غ (g), ص (s), ض (d), ظ (z), and ط (t)

Despite the detailed explanations of phoneme production, the success of this method in helping students achieve proper pronunciation remains unclear. Further study of students following this text would be needed to provide a deeper evaluation of the outcomes of phonetics and speech anatomy instruction on Arabic learners’ pronunciation. While transliteration can serve as a helpful reference for non-native speakers, it can be misleading. For instance, the sounds represented as (خ: “k” or غ: “g”) fail to capture the guttural

nature of these Arabic phonemes, potentially creating poor pronunciation habits in students. Moreover, the brief phonetic descriptions may not be sufficient to help learners grasp the subtle differences in articulation, especially for sounds like ع (‘) or ط (t), which have no direct English equivalents.

The *Mastering Arabic* textbook by Jane Wightwick and Mahmoud Gaafar (2024) introduces the Arabic alphabet by grouping letters with similar shapes, distinguished only by the number and placement of dots above or below the letters. Each letter is presented with its English transliteration and is accompanied by an example of a similar sound in English. For instance, the letter ب (ba) is equated to the “b” sound in the word “bat.” The textbook also offers free access to a companion website. This site offers supplementary materials, such as audio recordings of the letters, videos, and sample conversations.

The first six units introduce the Arabic alphabet. Each unit begins with a new set of letters, followed by exercises focused on connecting them, conversation practice, video content, and a summary of the newly introduced vocabulary. While these activities offer rich practice, this textbook follows the popular approach of relying on transliteration and English examples to help learners familiarize themselves with the sounds of the letters.

The authors of all five textbooks introduce the Arabic alphabet and its phonemes through transliteration with English letters. The accompanying audio drills and exercises, found in both the textbooks and their accompanying DVDs or websites, are used to guide students toward proper pronunciation and writing practices. While this method of transliteration can initially simplify the learning process, particularly for letters with English equivalents, its effectiveness in teaching letters without English equivalents remains uncertain despite its widespread use.

Another method in the field of foreign language teaching is “The Natural Approach,” which is based on Krashen’s Monitor Theory and developed primarily by Tracy Terrell and Stephen Krashen. This approach is built on the following principles:

1. Comprehension is basic and essential to language learning.
2. Comprehension precedes production.
3. Spoken competence emerges in stages.
4. Conscious focus is on meaningful communication.
5. Reduce affective filters.
6. Avoid overt corrections of speech errors (Ryding, 2013).

The main objective of this approach is to build and reinforce speaking skills. Like other approaches in foreign language teaching, it teaches all four language modalities. However, it does not specifically address teaching the alphabet. This omission is significant when teaching Arabic, especially since many students will likely only be familiar with the script and alphabet used in their first language and will have little to no familiarity with the Arabic alphabet. As such, extra time and attention must be spent teaching the unique symbols and phonemes of the Arabic language to ensure that students build the proper foundations and achieve proper pronunciation.

These foundations built upon the language's phonemes and alphabet are essential for advancing towards linguistic proficiency. Before students can achieve proficiency, they must master an accurate pronunciation of the letters along with literacy skills to read and write these letters correctly.

Along these lines, Khaled Yahya Huthaily proposed the phonological knowledge approach in his PhD dissertation, *Second Language Instruction with Phonological Knowledge: Teaching Arabic to Speakers of English* (2008). This approach emphasizes explicit instruction in the phonetics and phonology of Arabic and English letters to improve students' recognition and production of Arabic sounds. In his experimental study, Huthaily provides the students with the following: (a) international phonetic alphabets, (b) a quick introduction to the alphabet letters, (c) a quick introduction to the speech mechanism, (d) terminology used when describing speech sounds, (e) the vowels of English, (f) the vowels of Arabic, (g) the consonants of English, and (h) the consonants of Arabic. These elements are supplemented by Brustad's *Alif Baa*, which Huthaily uses for its phonemic transcriptions. He claims that explicit instruction in the phonetics and phonologies of English and Arabic improved the sound production and recognition skills of adult Arabic learners (p. ii).

While Huthaily's findings appear promising, his research is relatively new and requires further studies on a larger scale over multiple semesters. Additionally, the study raises questions about the feasibility of implementing such an approach within current Arabic curricula. Huthaily's approach proposes comprehensive instruction in Arabic and English phonology before introducing language used for communication, even at the introductory level. This raises concerns about the practicality of introducing this approach into university-level language instruction, which often follows rigid, department-wide timelines.

In sum, teaching the Arabic alphabet to non-native speakers is an important yet complex process that has led to varying pedagogical approaches. However, the common approach in all the textbooks analyzed in this literature review—*Arabiyyat al-Naas Part I, Alif Baa, Ahlan wa Sahlan, Arabic for Life, and Mastering Arabic*—is a reliance on English transliteration symbols to introduce Arabic letters. While this method is relatively efficient, challenges persist for letters which do not have English equivalents. These challenges lead to continued difficulties for students in pronunciation as they progress through their Arabic learning.

1.2. *The Multisensory Approach*

In response to the need for a more natural approach to Arabic language learning, the lead author developed the e-course "Arabic for Beginners" (Chami, 2023) with the technological assistance of the Center for Innovative Learning at the Lebanese American University in Beirut. The authors propose that Arabic language learners can learn the Arabic alphabet through a more natural language acquisition process, which will enable students to more accurately reproduce the sounds which are absent in English and distinguish between distinct Arabic letters. This proposed new method adopts a multisensory approach.

This multisensory approach incorporates visual and auditory faculties through a process which more closely resembles first language acquisition, rather than a reliance on transliteration and translation. As with young learners, students are exposed to a variety of audio-visual techniques designed to engage their senses as they are introduced to each letter of the alphabet. For example, real-life images which resonate with students' reality often accompany lessons, along with entertaining alphabet songs, interactive exercises, and appealing visuals. In this way, students' senses are engaged, and they become immersed in their learning, just as they were during the natural language acquisition process of their first language. The visual and auditory materials introduced in the "Arabic for Beginners" e-course are presented on a single page without accompanying English transliteration or translation. This allows learners to simultaneously remember the sound and name of each letter, facilitating learning "by ear," which represents the first stage, or capacity stage, of the "mimic method" (Ness, 2019).

According to Murray et al. (2020), "multisensory information can benefit perceptual, memory, and decision-making processes. These benefits commonly manifest in superior detection and discrimination of multisensory stimuli, as well as improved perception and subsequent memory of unisensory representation of an object previously encoded in a multisensory context" (p.1). Similarly, Ladan Shams and Aaron R. Seitz (2008) stated that "multisensory stimulation has been argued to provide a redundancy that is crucial for extracting information that would not be possible based on unisensory stimulation alone in early infancy" (p. 411). While the specific neuroplasticity of infants may not be identical to that of adults, the underlying mechanisms of multisensory learning remain across age groups. Research in cognitive science suggests that multisensory integration—combining visual, auditory, and tactile inputs—is beneficial for language learning at any age, as it enhances the brain's ability to encode and retain new information. As Emmanuelle Dionne-Dostie et al. (2015) stated, "Multisensory stimulation promotes heightened attention, perceptual processing, and memory in adults as well as in infants" (p. 38).

By fostering an environment where language acquisition occurs naturally through repetition and "redundancy" and by moving away from reliance on translation or transliteration, multisensory pedagogy reinforces the connections between sounds and symbols through multiple exposures. Furthermore, it suggests that the broader cognitive frameworks of organic language learning, which occur in early childhood, might likewise benefit learners of all ages. This approach opens the door for adult learners, in particular, to experience language acquisition guided by the principles of redundancy, repetition, and sensory stimulation.

The course "Arabic for Beginners" (Chami, 2023) introduces the alphabet letters in Module I, organized across five lessons. Each lesson presents five or six letters, grouped based on their similarity in shape to help with memorization. Each letter is introduced as a phoneme through a functional word, accompanied by a corresponding image and an audio recording for proper pronunciation of both the phoneme and the letter it represents. For example, the letter ط (Ṭā') is introduced through the word "ṭālib" (طالب, student), and the letter ص (Ṣāad) is introduced through the word "baṣal" (بصل, onion). In

each functional word, the target letter is highlighted in red to draw students' attention to the new symbol and sound. This method combines the visual and auditory to, in Shams and Seitz's (2008) words, "provide a redundancy that is crucial for extracting information that would not be possible based on unisensory stimulation alone" (p. 412).

The learning process for each letter follows the same sequential pattern: watch, listen, mimic, repeat, and produce. First, students look at an image associated with the letter, depicting a familiar object or scene, followed by looking at the written word which corresponds to that image alongside the target letter. The next stage is listening. In this step, students hear the correct pronunciation of the letter as well as of the word which has been introduced in the visual step. After this listening stage, students then engage in mimicking and reproducing the letters and words themselves through audio recordings, which they then review and correct with or without the guidance of the instructor. Continuing through this learning process, they will then engage in repetition. Through repeated practice, students reinforce their ability to recall the letters and their associated words. Although students are not receiving new information during this step in the learning process, its role in their learning is crucial, and as such is emphasized in this approach. Moreover, the use of audio-visual tools prove highly effective in aiding students' recall of the letters. As Chesla (2000) explained, "Because humans are very visually oriented, we tend to remember much better when we can see things as well as hear or read them" (p. 142).

By combining the letter itself, its representational functional vocabulary word, and a voiceover for correct pronunciation — all encapsulated in a single click—students can easily listen, watch, mimic, repeat, and produce as many times as needed until they feel confident in identifying the letter, the sound it represents, and its corresponding vocabulary word. This setup is particularly effective because it mirrors natural language learning more closely by providing immediate, multisensory feedback. This kind of multisensory approach is essential to developing accurate pronunciation and recognition, especially for sounds unfamiliar to English speakers. Additionally, it eliminates the need for external navigation, which is a common drawback of traditional Arabic textbooks. The five textbooks previously discussed typically include audio exercises on separate DVDs or linked websites, requiring students to locate and play specific tracks for each exercise outside of their textbooks. Not only is it tedious for students to constantly switch between the textbook and external media, but it prevents seamless and repetitive pronunciation practice, disrupting the flow of learning.

In terms of the vocabulary selection which accompanies each letter, the words are limited to specific themes such as Arab countries or cities, fruits or vegetables, animals, clothing, colors, and household items. By centering the vocabulary on specific themes in this way, it helps students to build a functional vocabulary as they are simultaneously learning the alphabet. This vocabulary bank is then recycled throughout the remaining modules of the course. Recycling forms or vocabulary frequently in the input is crucial for ensuring retention and reinforcement, as highlighted by Al-Hawary (2013, p. 24).

When students encounter a letter alongside a corresponding image or word and then hear it pronounced, their retention is significantly enhanced. This aligns with Shams and Seitz's (2008) argument that "multisensory exposure promotes more effective learning of the information" (p. 411). This process of multisensory learning fosters a more natural acquisition of the letter and its proper pronunciation, eliminating the need for English transliteration or translation. It mirrors the approach used in teaching young children, where educators rely on visuals, songs, and repetition to ensure effective retention. As a result, students learn the Arabic alphabet in a more organic way, as they once learned the English alphabet as children, and require less mediation to correct inaccuracies in pronunciation or the redundancy of memorizing two sets of symbols for each letter (the Arabic symbol and the English transliteration). Furthermore, the use of fun audio-visual resources remains stimulating and engaging to adult students as well as to children. By incorporating such interactive elements, boredom is alleviated, language anxiety is reduced, and motivation to learn is increased.

In addition to introducing the letters through audio-visual materials, the course provides drills for practice, focusing on teaching students how to read, write, and pronounce each letter accurately. Recognizing that a single exposure may not ensure retention in the learner's interlanguage system (Al-Hawary, 2013), the course adopts a strategy of recycling the introduced letters and corresponding words. This repetition, coupled with recorded explanations on how to read, write, and pronounce each letter and word properly, is essential for better retention and reinforcement. As Nation (2001) noted, "At a minimum, most researchers cite 6–7 repetitions or recyclings of words as the lowest number of times words should be repeated for maximum learning" (p. 81, as cited in Ryding, 2013, p. 202). By revisiting the material and reinforcing it through various exercises to produce an appropriate number of "recyclings," students have a greater chance of internalizing the information and integrating it into their language proficiency. In other words, the approach utilized in teaching the alphabet eliminates reliance on a first language (in this case, English) and deemphasizes translation work. Instead, it focuses on intensive exposure to the target language while reinforcing interactive or productive skills (speaking and listening) and emphasizing repetition, which aids fluency and accurate pronunciation.

Additionally, this course uses animation as another creative teaching tool. Two animated characters, named "Sammy" and "Yasmine", introduce the letters of the Arabic alphabet to students. This method offers an extra dimension of exposure to multisensory tools, as the animated characters, with their movements, appearances, colors, and gestures, visually engage learners to deepen their learning of the alphabet and language. The use of animated characters is designed to encourage students to engage with this new alphabet as well as keep the process of learning positive, enjoyable, and engaging. The benefits of using animation in language learning are supported by Ridha et al. (2022), whose experimental study focused on English learners aged 19–22. They observed that "students who were taught using animated videos retained more productive knowledge...than those who were taught using still images" (p. 11). Ridha et al. (2022) concluded that "animated videos facilitate

assimilation, make studying more interesting, and make learning more productive” (p. 11).

2. Methodology

2.1. Data collection and processing

The research followed a quantitative approach to evaluate the effectiveness of various teaching methods for Arabic instruction. Data was collected using an anonymous survey administered via the American University of Beirut (AUB) Lime Survey platform. The survey consisted of open-ended questions to allow for greater expression and investigation into students’ experiences, focusing on the teaching methods used to learn the Arabic alphabet and their perceived effectiveness. A total of 84 students, who voluntarily agreed to participate after receiving an initial invitation email and one reminder, participated in this study. Twenty-four students completed the survey fully, and sixty participants completed it partially.

All participants were 18 years or older and enrolled in Arabic language courses at the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies (CAMES) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), and at the SINARC-Arabic Language and Culture program at the Lebanese American University of Beirut (LAU), including participants from the “Arabic for Beginners” online course. The participants formed a diverse group, representing universities in the United States, Europe, and Lebanon. This provided a broad perspective on the topic across different academic and cultural backgrounds. The majority had taken one or two semesters of Arabic instruction, and none had prior exposure to learning the language before college. The researcher collected and analyzed the responses asynchronously, ensuring flexibility and convenience for participants.

2.2. Survey questions

The anonymous survey included the following open-ended questions:

1. How many sessions were dedicated to studying the alphabet?
2. What teaching methods or textbooks did the teacher use for teaching the alphabet?
3. How did you study to learn the alphabet (e.g., flashcards, memorization, transliteration or translation, phonetic symbols)?
4. Which method do you find more effective: voice recording, transliteration, or a combination of both? Why?
5. Do you feel confident in reading, writing, and spelling the letters properly?
6. Can you pronounce the letters that have no equivalence in English, such as *خ، ح، غ، ع، ط، ظ، ص، ض*, correctly?
7. Do you experience any kind of confusion between the letters? If yes, please specify.
8. Do you believe that learning Arabic letters without relying on transliteration or English translation could improve pronunciation accuracy?

9. How do you feel about the methodology of teaching the Arabic alphabet similar to how a child learns their native language alphabet?
10. In your opinion, what are the potential advantages and disadvantages of adopting a methodology like “Arabic for Beginners” in teaching the Arabic alphabet to non-native speakers? (participants who are not familiar with the provided methodology in “Arabic for Beginners” course can answer this question based on the abstract provided about the course in the survey).

3. Findings

The average number of sessions students spent learning the Arabic alphabet ranged between four and twelve. Major textbooks used included *Alif Baa*, *‘Arabiyyat al-Naas*, and *Mastering Arabic*. Approximately ten students relied on online materials prepared by their teachers. None of the students reported using *Arabic for Life* or *Ahlan wa Sahlan* in this survey. Students enrolled in the “Arabic for Beginners” course also participated in the study.

It is worth reiterating that all reviewed textbooks used transliteration and phonetic symbols in their approach, except for the “Arabic for Beginners” course, which mainly relied on a multisensory approach and a “listen, watch, mimic, repeat, and produce” process to teach the alphabet. As such, it was not necessary to have an equal number of participants for each textbook in this survey, as the study focused on the teaching approach used rather than specific textbooks. Thus, the study compared the efficacy of teaching the alphabet using the transliteration method versus the multisensory approach.

- Forty-seven out of eighty-four participants (55.95%) relied on transliteration and symbol recognition for learning the alphabet.
- Seventeen out of eighty-four participants (20.24%) relied on flashcards, memorization, and shadowing the teacher.
- Twenty out of eighty-four participants (23.81%) utilized the multisensory approach.
- Sixty-seven out of eighty-four participants (79.76%) agreed that transliteration is not the best method for learning the alphabet, as it does not accurately represent sounds which do not exist in their native language, particularly English. Participants described transliteration as a “poor replacement for hearing and producing sounds.” Others remarked that “relying too much on transliteration builds bad habits, limiting learners to the transliteration alone.”
- Sixty-three out of eighty-four participants (75%) reported feeling confident in reading, writing, pronouncing, and spelling the letters properly.
- Forty-seven out of eighty-four participants (55.95%) experienced confusion between certain letters, such as: hamza (ء) and ‘ayn (ع), Ḥā (ح) and hā’ (هـ), and thā’ (ث) and dhāal (ذ)
- Seventy-six out of eighty-four participants (90.48%) supported the methodology of teaching the Arabic alphabet similarly to how a child learns their native language. They described this approach as “useful and effective, provided there is enough repetition and practice.”

Participants noted that this method “eliminates interference from other languages and helps the brain focus on a specific set of sounds” rather than introducing an additional layer of sounds and symbols through transliteration. Some added that this approach “forces learners to listen carefully to how a letter is pronounced instead of associating it with sounds from English or other languages.”

- Seventy-three out of eighty-four participants (86.9%) found the methodology used in the “Arabic for Beginners” course advantageous. They commented that it “helps students become comfortable with the letters on a deeper level and forces them to learn the alphabet intuitively and organically.” However, participants acknowledged some disadvantages, including that the method may take longer and could initially be challenging for beginners. Nevertheless, they agreed that it is beneficial in the long run.

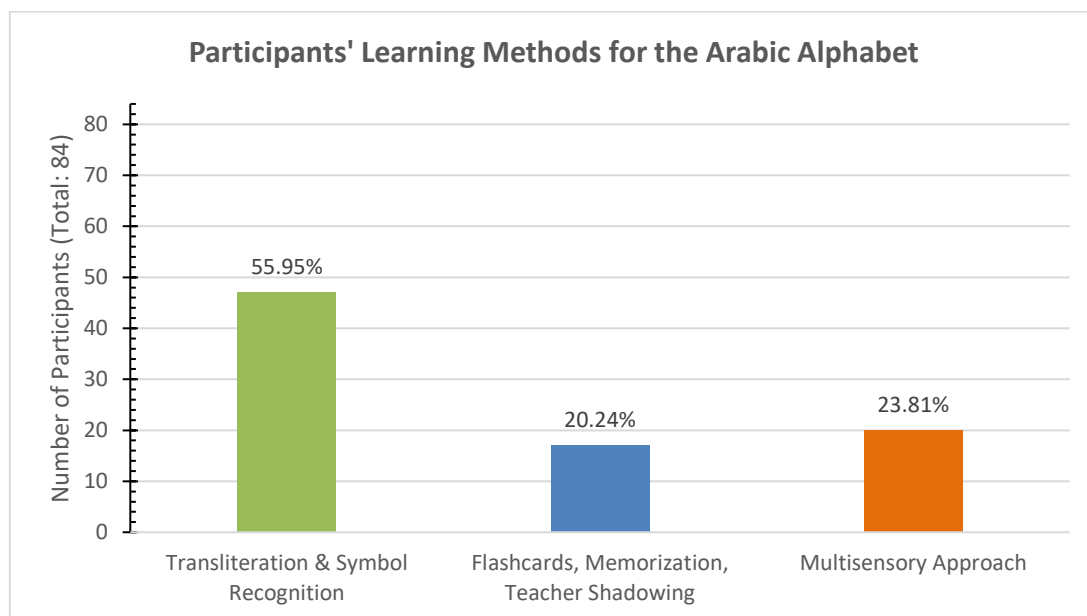


Figure 1. Learning methods utilized by participants in learning the Arabic alphabet

Figure 1 demonstrates how the majority of students responding to this survey indicated that they had used the transliteration method to learn the Arabic alphabet. This highlights the prevalence of this method in Arabic language education, despite the uncertainty of its effectiveness.

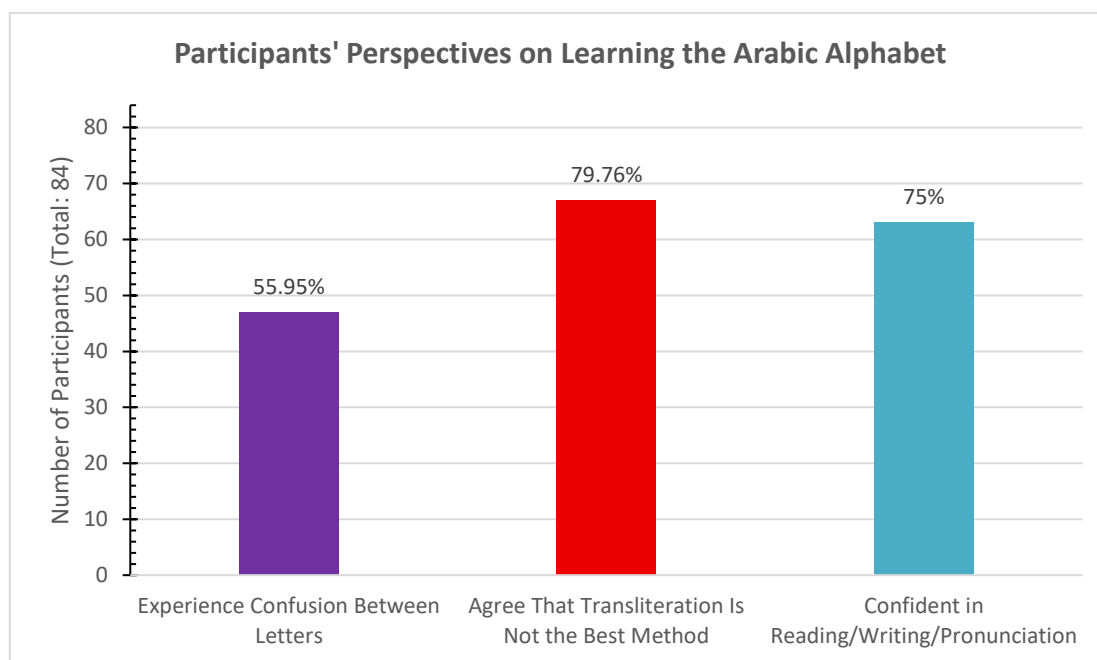


Figure 2. Participants expressing various perspectives on learning the Arabic alphabet

Figure 2 highlights participants' perspectives on some aspects of learning the Arabic alphabet. Importantly, the large majority of participants (79.76%) agreed that transliteration is not the best method for learning the Arabic alphabet. Additionally, the majority of these participants (55.95%) utilized transliteration in their learning. Therefore, most of the participants are speaking from their own personal experience of using transliteration as their learning method. It is also important to note is that over 50% of participants experience confusion between Arabic letters which do not have exact equivalents in English.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

4.1. Common Teaching Methods Identified in the Survey

4.1.1. Transliteration, Symbol Recognition, and Translation

A total of 55.95% of the participants reported using this method to learn the Arabic alphabet. Widely applied in many Arabic textbooks, this method was critically evaluated by many respondents to be insufficient. A significant 79.76% of respondents reported that transliteration does not accurately depict Arabic phonemes, particularly for letters without English equivalents such as ع ('ayn), غ (ghayn), ح (Haa), خ (Khaa), ص (Saad), ض (Daad), ط (Taa), and ظ (DHaa). Participants highlighted that "transliteration can foster reliance on non-native representations, potentially hindering accurate pronunciation."

4.1.2. Flashcards, Memorization, and Shadowing

Utilized by 20.24% of students, these traditional methods focused on reinforcing recognition and memorization. However, they are less effective in addressing pronunciation challenges. Students reported ongoing confusion between certain letters, including: hamza (ء) and 'ayn (ع), Ḥā (ح) and hā' (ه), and thā' (ث) and dhāal (ذ).

4.1.3. *Multisensory Approach*

Utilized by 23.8% of the participants, this method was the basis of the “Arabic for Beginners” course, which emphasized a “listen, watch, mimic, repeat, and produce” pattern. It received positive feedback for promoting natural language learning, closely mirroring how children learn their native alphabet. Even respondents who did not use this method acknowledged its potential for creating a more intuitive learning experience.

A substantial majority (90.4%) of the participants supported teaching methodologies that simulate first language acquisition. These methods prioritize immersion and auditory–visual cues to facilitate learning without relying on transliteration and symbol recognition. The multisensory approach, in particular, was highlighted as highly effective, with 86.9% of respondents noting its ability to promote a deeper and more intuitive understanding of the Arabic alphabet.

By contrast, transliteration, while frequently used, was perceived as a limited tool. Participants reported that transliteration often fails to correctly convey sounds which are found in Arabic, but not in their native language. This limitation can lead to persistent mispronunciations and dependence on English-based phonetic renderings. Heavy reliance on transliteration was criticized for fostering “bad habits” and limiting learners’ ability to recognize and reproduce Arabic sounds independently of their native language’s phonetic framework. Additionally, the use of transliteration led to challenges in distinguishing between visually or phonetically similar letters, such as hamza (ء) and ‘ayn (ع), Ha (ح) and hā’ (ه), and thā’ (ث) and dhāal (ذ).

Participants who adopted the multisensory method reported stronger, more intuitive mastery of the Arabic alphabet. This method was commended for reducing interference from English sounds and encouraging active listening and pronunciation practice. However, some respondents noted that this method demands more time and effort, posing initial challenges for beginners who may find it more overwhelming compared to transliteration-based methods.

4.2. *Limitations*

It is important to note that the “Arabic for Beginners” course is an e-course, which may not appeal to all learners due to varying learning preferences. For instance, some individuals might prefer studying with hard copy textbooks. Additionally, the course may not be as accessible or user-friendly for older students or those with limited digital literacy, particularly those with hearing difficulties. The primary target audience for this e-course generally comprises younger, digitally savvy, and technologically proficient students.

While the course enables learners to study independently without direct assistance from a language expert, it is highly recommended to supplement this course with guidance from an Arabic teacher. The combination of these linguistic and pedagogical resources can greatly improve learning, particularly in productive skills such as speaking and writing. Finally, it is worth noting that the research conducted may not be sufficient to prove the efficacy of the proposed method. For this reason, further study must be conducted with a larger group of students, in addition to comparing recordings of students who

learned the alphabet using “Arabic for Beginners” e-course and the other above-mentioned textbooks.

4.3. Implications for Future Teaching

The study’s findings suggest that while traditional methods like transliteration for learning the alphabet may offer a quicker start, they have limitations in developing accurate pronunciation and deeper language comprehension. By contrast, the multisensory approach, although initially more demanding of students and their level of engagement with the target language, appears to develop a more thorough and long-lasting acquisition of the language and its alphabet, especially for letters with no English equivalents. For greater success, teachers may benefit from adopting a balanced approach that combines immersive methods with supplemental tools such as flashcards and targeted pronunciation practice. This combination could effectively address common learner difficulties, such as confusion between similar sounds, as well as aiding memorization.

Overall, the research highlights the effectiveness of teaching Arabic using techniques similar to first-language acquisition. Emphasizing listening, mimicry, and repetition helps solidify learners’ understanding of the alphabet without relying on English transliteration. These findings support a gradual shift toward immersive, multisensory teaching methods, particularly as students gain familiarity with the language.

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