

# UC Berkeley

## L2 Journal

### Title

Online Arabic Language Learning: What Happens After?

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0bf3r8g1>

### Journal

L2 Journal, 4(2)

### Authors

Blake, Robert J.  
Shiri, Sonia

### Publication Date

2012

### DOI

10.5070/L24212462

### Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0bf3r8g1#supplemental>

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2012 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

---

# Online Arabic Language Learning: What Happens After?

ROBERT J. BLAKE

*University of California, Davis*  
*E-mail: rjblake@ucdavis.edu*

SONIA SHIRI

*University of Arizona*  
*E-mail: soniashiri@email.arizona.edu*

---

Learning Arabic, a category IV less commonly taught language (LCTL), can be a daunting task even with the luxury of a five-day per week schedule, good teachers, office hours, and solid learning materials. This study reports on the successes and challenges of teaching Arabic within a distance-learning environment. With a grant from the Fund for Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE), the authors developed *Arabic Without Walls (AWW)*, a first-year online Arabic course supported by Web materials (e.g. text, graphics, sounds, short human-interest videos, and self-correcting Java-scripted exercises). The *AWW* course was delivered in a *Moodle* wrapper with weekly chat (voice and text) sessions. *AWW* was taught for two years at the University of California, Berkeley (2007--2009) under the direction of Sonia Shiri and then for two more years at the University of California, Irvine (2009--2011) by Maha Alsaffar. The *AWW* course was designed to prepare students to seamlessly enter a second-year Arabic class with competence equal to that of those students studying Arabic in a face-to-face format. The present study focuses on student outcomes and their reflections during and after this two-semester course. One of the unexpected findings was that the small-group computer-mediated communication (CMC) sessions with sound and text gave students more personal attention than would have been possible in the classroom setting. The overall student impression of this online learning experience suggests that *AWW* was a credible alternative for students who otherwise would not have had access to Arabic instruction at their home institution or for those who had sought a more flexible learning environment due to their own schedules and life circumstances. In this study, we seek to contribute to the establishment of best practice for online language learning, including a CMC component.

---

## INTRODUCTION

When language instructors contemplate approving credit for distance learning language courses, the phrase *equivalent educational experience* seems to dominate the discussion. Despite the good intentions of the profession to maintain quality, the expression itself is based on the mistaken notion that all classes delivered exclusively in the classroom—what some consider the *gold standard*—are equivalent experiences (see Sieloff Magnan (2007) for a critique of current in-class teaching practices). The truth is that language courses, whether delivered *in situ* or online, enjoy certain affordances but also suffer from specific limitations.

To a great degree, the differences among same-level language courses stem from the individual talents and limitations of each instructor and the quality of the learning materials they use, although the course format itself can also shape the nature of the learning environment in significant ways. While the exercise of equating courses delivered by different instructors via different formats remains an elusive goal, making sure that students can move seamlessly back and forth between in-class and online learning experiences should be possible and, moreover, constitutes an absolute requirement for a well-articulated online language curriculum.

Second language development to the advanced level in ACTFL terms is a slow process that takes anywhere from five to seven years, or 700 to 2,000 hours of study, depending on the complexity of the language in question (Blake, 2008, pp. 1-2). Therefore, each learning experience along the way should be, above all else, stimulating, motivating, and well articulated. Clearly, there exists more than one pathway to reach this goal, no matter how much the profession values the in-class format over other avenues of language study (i.e. independent study, hybrid classes, online courses, or study abroad).

In the case of less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) such as Arabic, all of these avenues may not be available to students due to the home institution's lack of course offerings and/or other personal factors. Accordingly, this study provides a global assessment of *Arabic Without Walls (AWW)*, a first-year Arabic language curriculum taught entirely online within a *Moodle* environment (an open-source platform course-management system) supported by a synchronous chat tool that offers audio and textual exchanges in Arabic (*Wimba*), as described in more detail below. Understandably, Arabic instructors would like to see an introductory course emphasize all four skills as well as the development of culture knowledge. With regards to Arabic writing in particular, the cursive system requires additional special attention because of the multiple forms for each letter has based on its function in the initial, medial, final or stand-alone position. A successful online Arabic course must satisfactorily ensure that these four skills are properly addressed in a first-year online format in order to ensure success at the higher levels of language instruction.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, we will provide a reflection on learning Arabic via the *AWW* curriculum as originally instantiated at UC Berkeley and, then, later at UC Irvine with particular attention given to the question of articulation. In this study, we are not concerned

---

<sup>1</sup> Not all Arabic language programs or faculty support teaching Arabic at a distance for two main reasons. First, most faculty choose to believe that an online course could never produce the same learning outcomes that students would achieve in the classroom learning environment. This belief is not based on empirical data, but constitutes a strongly held conviction nonetheless. Similar to the approach of many FL teachers, the Arabic field is dominated by a teacher-centered focus, which is often at odds with the more student-centered approach promoted in an online format. It is not an easy proposition to disabuse faculty of these engrained opinions even with strong evidence in hand.

Second, many faculty fear that online Arabic courses will *bleed* students away from the in-class enrollments and, therefore, provoke the administration to decrease the programmatic funding to Arabic programs struggling to expand their offerings. The demand for Arabic courses is bursting at the seams at the moment, especially in light of the relative shortage of qualified instructors. In this context, the online courses rarely impact the in-class enrollments negatively, but do allow students an alternative route of access to Arabic language instruction.

The funding mechanism for online courses should not be minimized either, but departments stand to benefit from the potential revenues that could be generated by online courses. Other minor objections—such as how to practice writing or speaking in the online format, have been addressed in the main body of this paper.

with providing comparative proficiency data between in-class and online students; in other words, the goal here was not to argue for the superiority of one format over another. That approach implicitly relies on the thorny notion of *equivalent experiences* already critiqued above, which assumes that it is possible to measure equivalent learning experiences without controlling for the many variables resulting from differences both on the part of the instructor and the student. In addition, the present-day language assessment tools are often inadequate to tease out significant linguistic proficiency differences among first-year students learning in distinct environments (see discussion in Blake, Wilson, Pardo Ballester, Cetto, 2008, pp. 123-124). These assessment difficulties should not be surprising when one considers the limited vocabulary covered in the first year—less than 1,000 words for a Romance language, which is even lower for a non-cognate language like Arabic—and the insufficient time-on-task available to learn the basic linguistic structures. This limitation is due to the nature of the gains achieved during the first year of second language study, not a criticism of any student, teacher, curriculum, or particular testing instrument. The fuzzy nature of ACTFL rubrics *Novice Low*, *Novice Mid*, *Novice High*—an improvement over the Interagency Linguistic Roundtable’s scale of 0 or 0+—are symptomatic of the lack of descriptive precision in defining a first-year student’s language development which is also true in the case of the online student. In any event, such rubrics do not predict how students would perform as they move from an online environment to conventional instruction at higher levels of language study.

In this study, we wish to analyze the comments and reactions from instructors and students sampled both during the online course as well as two years later in order to provide a more ethnographic profile of online learning that capture the students’ L2 progress, albeit in a manner different from the experimental or quantitative approach to language assessment. In other words, we ask: What do students think of their online learning experience? Were they satisfied with their language learning experience? What happened to these L2 Arabic students after they completed their first-year online Arabic language course? How did they fare when they joined other more traditional learning environments? Accordingly, we are interested in ascertaining whether or not the students who enrolled in the *AWW* sequence:

- (1) developed positive attitudes while learning Arabic online, as exhibited in their comments extracted from the course Wiki;
- (2) succeeded in learning the introductory-level materials and exhibited motivation and appreciation for the course while learning in the online format, as documented in the FIPSE final report; and, finally,
- (3) continued on to intermediate and more advanced studies in Arabic at a later time without being at a disadvantage vis-à-vis students coming exclusively from in-class programs, as reported in a delayed survey instrument.

### ***AWW*: DEVELOPMENT, SCOPE, IMPLEMENTATION**

*AWW* resulted from a joint venture of the University of California Consortium for Language Learning and Teaching (Robert Blake, co-PI) and the National Middle East Language Resource Center at Brigham Young University (Kirk Belnap, co-PI) with funding from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE Grant P116B030526) over a four-year period starting in 2003. Sonia Shiri, then lecturer at UC

Berkeley and coordinator of the Arabic program, designed the course based on the program standards for the regular introductory level and with an eye to securing a seamless transition into an intermediate face-to-face level course. She then served as the instructor of record for the academic year 2007-2008, the first year that the course was offered for UC Berkeley credit and she oversaw its instruction by Maha Alsaffar, a lecturer, in the second year of delivery at Berkeley (2008-2009). The online materials were loosely organized around the most popular introductory Arabic textbook with its two components, *Alif Baa* (Brustad, Al-Batal, & Al-Tonsi, 2004b) (a pronunciation, alphabet and basic expressions primer) and *Al Kitaab Part I* (Brustad, Al-Batal, & Al-Tonsi, 2004a), a general introductory Arabic language textbook.

The project was created with the purpose of sharing resources across the UC system and to address the rise in demand for Arabic study after 9/11 both in the UC and across the nation (see Shiri 2010 for a discussion of Arabic and Arabic study in the U.S.). *AWW* has been used at several institutions outside California: Brigham Young University, Carnegie Mellon University, and Miami University of Oxford, Ohio, to name a few. It was patterned after a previous FIPSE project *Spanish Without Walls* (*SWW*, FIPSE award #P116B000315] developed by co-PIs Robert Blake (University of California, Davis) and María Victoria Gonzales-Pagani (University of California, Santa Cruz). *SWW* consisted of an online distance course that responded to the need to provide increased access to an oversubscribed language (Blake & Delforge, 2007). Conversely, *AWW* was intended as a model to expand access to LCTL instruction through technology-assisted distance instruction in order to reach students who had no access to Arabic instruction at their home institution or who needed a more flexible learning environment due to their particular life circumstances. The course was launched in the Fall of 2007 by UC Berkeley and it had a total of sixteen students, most of whom enrolled from the other UC campuses using a UC-wide mechanism that sanctioned simultaneous enrollments and transfer credit across the different campuses (i.e. Senate Regulation #554). With instructor approval, the course was also open to enrollment from the general public through the Extension's concurrent enrollment program. After two years at Berkeley, the course moved to UC Irvine where it was offered from Fall 2009 through Spring 2011 on the same basis.

The *AWW* course consisted of three components: (1) reading and assignments from the textbooks, *Alif Baa* and *Al-Kitaab*, and the accompanying DVDs (2) twenty-five online lessons that included content-based cultural materials, grammar instruction, activities, exercises, listening exercises using personal video vignettes of Arabic speakers from different countries, pronunciation tips and speaking practice activities, and writing tasks (see web site: <http://arabicwithoutwall.ucdavis.edu/aww>), (3) bi-weekly synchronous and asynchronous chat sessions with audio and textual exchanges and feedback via the Wimba Voice tools.

Students followed a day-by-day, activity-by-activity breakdown of the syllabus that guided them through the textbook and the online materials. The syllabus was posted weekly on the *Moodle* site. Starting from the first week of the fall semester, students used the synchronous chat tool for student-student and student-instructor interactions initially for fifteen-minute periods twice per week and up to two hours per week by the end of the semester. Although the synchronous chats were mandatory, students signed up for the times of day or evening that best suited their schedules. This flexibility was particularly necessary for working students and students who were traveling domestically or overseas. Students shared the chat space with the instructor and up to three other students to converse about both specific pre-prepared topics and spontaneously elicited ones. The bimodal nature of the

chat tool (i.e. text and audio exchanges) offered the instructor an effective tool for giving corrective feedback in text format without interrupting the flow of the audio conversation. Both the instructor and students could also exchange text messages at any time to support their chat partners with the words they might have been looking for or were using incorrectly.

Students also had the option of meeting with their peers independently outside the mandated times, although few did. The asynchronous chat was regularly used for leaving oral responses to instructor audio prompts based on the topic at hand in preparation for the synchronous conversation scheduled at a later date. The instructor would leave oral and written feedback for students in the chat. Asynchronous chats were also periodically used for assessment purposes whereby students would collaborate on a skit and post it for the instructor to correct. The messaging/email function in *Moodle* was frequently used not only for submitting written assignments and getting instructor feedback but also for giving overall course feedback and for answering queries regarding certain aspects of the course. Email was regularly and swiftly answered by the instructor to avoid potential frustration on the part of students. Long threads of email messages would occasionally be exchanged between instructor and student until all of the student's queries were addressed in a similar fashion to the office hour format.

During the last weeks of the launch year of the course (2007-2008), the online students were paired up via the chat tool with students from the regular introductory face-to-face program at Berkeley. Because both the in-class and online courses followed a parallel curriculum, all students were assigned the same tasks and attended the online chats under the guidance of the instructor. These interactions, which were part of the syllabus, served three main purposes. First, the chats connected the online students with the larger Arabic learning community at UC Berkeley, albeit virtually. Second, the successes obtained by chatting affirmed to the online students their legitimacy as competent Arabic language learners vis-à-vis other Berkeley students enrolled in one of the nation's premiere Arabic language programs. Third, it gave the conventional students an opportunity to open their horizons to other modes of learning, which, at a minimum, got them interested in typing in Arabic.

In the first week of the online course, students learned to type in Arabic with the assistance of *Aktub*, an online Arabic typing program (<http://aktub.com>). Step-by-step activities from the first preliminary lessons of *AWW* guided them in developing their Arabic typing accuracy and speed. Although typing is an obvious skill to emphasize in an online course, particular attention was devoted in *AWW* to the development of handwriting because the profession expects that students of Arabic write everything by hand. In most Arabic curricula, learning to type in Arabic is a rarity. For the sake of a smooth transition into handwriting-based instruction in the face-to-face format, handwriting instruction began on the second week of the fall semester; assignments were scanned and emailed back and forth between the instructor and students for correction and feedback (see Appendix A for a handwriting sample of connect-the-letters exercise from *Alif Baa*). Handwriting continued to be a focus throughout the program and students were asked to alternate typing and handwriting their written assignments even though the latter required the additional step of scanning and emailing. This process paid off as students in the *AWW* course not only developed the rarely mastered skill of typing in Arabic, but also succeeded in developing handwriting skills indistinguishable in quality from those of their conventional counterparts (see Appendix B, C, and D for two handwriting samples in the first half of the first semester and a typed sample from the last weeks of the same semester).

Assessments included regular written quizzes, a midterm, and a final that tested all skills as well as collaborative oral projects and skits. Although the online format presented a particularly challenging environment for collaborative oral projects, the course participants found a variety of technology-based solutions such as digital narratives or dialogues using PowerPoint and other programs. Several groups of students opted for hand illustrations, with or without captions, to which they would then add sound, and then submitted the entire project on YouTube (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gc4gw6Ig564> for an example).

A frequent fear with teaching in an online environment revolves around the possible increase in work for the teacher. With respect to the workload encountered in this type of online format, the line between what counts as homework and what counts as class time is blurred. For the instructor, the definition of class time, office hours, preparation, and grading had to be revamped. In terms of the number of hours per week, the online *AWW* instructor's workload was comparable to the workload shouldered in the regular *in situ* class. Instead of the five contact hours a week in face-to-face classes, the *AWW* instructor met online with small groups of students initially for less than five hours but then gradually this increased to more than five contact hours per week. While a good portion of the grading was computer-based, the instructor still had to grade the written prose by hand, whether typed or handwritten. Feedback was clearly written on or typed into the student work before being returned by email. The asynchronous voice work submitted by students required feedback as well. The instructor provided individual feedback in voice and textual form so that the students could examine it and re-submit their work through *Wimba*. Email exchanges, often outside the regular workday, addressed student questions about the content and offered them feedback on their progress. While interaction with students during the live chat time provided instruction, the planning of the step-by-step daily syllabus to guide student learning also constituted part of the overall instruction and thus routinely amounted to more than the standard five contact hours a week typically mandated in the face-to-face format.

The vast majority of students enrolled in the course were affiliated with another UC campus (UC Santa Cruz, UC Riverside, UC Merced, UC Davis, UC San Francisco, UC Irvine and even UCLA). UC Santa Cruz provided the most students, followed by UC Riverside and UC Merced – all three campuses had no Arabic instruction at the time of the *AWW* launch, 2007-2008.<sup>2</sup> Enrollments from UC campuses that offered Arabic such as UCLA and UC Davis were low and resulted from the students' inability to make the times at which the classes were offered. There were no enrollments from UC Santa Barbara or UC San Diego. UC Berkeley students were not allowed to enroll at the request of the Department of Near Eastern Studies, although there was interest in the course among this student population. In the launch year of 2007-2008, members of the community at large also enrolled in the course with instructor approval through the UC Berkeley Extension. Their motivation for taking Arabic included personal/heritage reasons or work-related interests. While the majority resided in different parts of California, one of these extension students lived in New Orleans, Louisiana. UC students, on the other hand, mostly fell into the usual categories of students typically enrolling in introductory Arabic classes. Four of the participants were graduate students of comparative literature, linguistics, and second language acquisition studies, in addition to students of other disciplines that involve field

---

<sup>2</sup> UC Riverside began providing introductory Arabic courses in 2009.

work in an Arab country such as archaeology, medicine or development. The other students were undergraduates from a large spectrum of majors. While four students from the class could be classified as heritage students, the majority pursued Arabic in order to satisfy a campus foreign language requirement or purely out of curiosity about the Arabic language and its culture. While these profiles are no different from the those of students that typically populate the conventional Arabic introductory classroom, noticeably absent among this online cohort was the student who plans to major or minor in Middle/Near Eastern Studies. This is consistent with the above-mentioned fact that (with one exception) no students from the four UC campuses that offer upper division Arabic instruction enrolled in *AWW*.

### Student attitudes about learning Arabic online

As the 2007-2008 online *AWW* course neared completion, students expressed their opinions about the nature and quality of this learning experience through the course wiki. They focused on those aspects of the course that made the strongest impressions on them. Some students reported on the period leading up to their enrollment in the course and shared their expectations about the program. One student wrote that, when she found out about the online Arabic class, a professor at her home campus language department tried to discourage her from taking the online class because she suspected that it would fail. This student reflected on the advice she received as follows:

When I did call about this class, someone from the language studies department warned me that an online language-learning class would not work well. And if the language in question were Arabic? The idea seemed doomed to fail, she told me. But I thought about my Arabic self-teaching and decided that anything had to be better than that. It would be great to have a teacher, someone who really knew what she was talking about, whom I could ask questions, and then the structure of it being a course that would force me to actually study. So, I didn't share the language studies professor's pessimistic view. Now that I've taken the class, what do I say? It turned out quite well... Overall, I thought the course was a great experience, and I have to agree with [fellow student] that a level-two online course would be wonderful!

In terms of the actual course, one dominant comment among all the students dealt with the usefulness of the bimodal chat tool and their unanimous praise for the instructor and her assistants. Despite some initial reservations about speaking online, students emphasized the importance of online exchanges, not only with the instructor and TA but also with peers. Each comment below comes from a separate participant in the *AWW* course.

I was initially a little anxious about the speaking component—whether I could get a microphone to work, how to plan time in my erratic work and home schedule—but it turned out surprisingly well!

I enjoyed the chat sessions and I feel I learned a lot from them. They were probably the more intensive part of the class and they helped me keep the rhythm throughout the semester.

One key to a successful class, and indeed a successful education is the student-to-student



interaction that takes place. For that, I'd like to say a special thanks to those of you who took time to correspond with me, even a little.

I loved the fact that part of our grade was to constantly communicate with the professor, TA, and classmates (though late at night when I still had a ton of homework to do, I didn't feel the same way!!) :-> I am thankful for it and for the struggle.

Student X and I met, on average, four times a week [online via *Wimba*] and went through the assignments together. I found this very helpful, because not only did it force me to put aside a few hours each day to study Arabic, it also gave me the opportunity to practice speaking Arabic with a peer (those online chats can be terrifying), work through questions we had, and have the real-life interaction of the standard real-life class.

The drop out rate for online courses is normally extremely high, over 50% across disciplines (Carr, 2000). Blake and Arispe (forthcoming) have claimed that students with a strong sense of conscientiousness (as defined by the Big Five Inventory scale (John & Srivastava, 1999)) and a preference for independent learning seem to do best in this learning environment, an observation also alluded to by several *AWW* participants:

I have learned that an online class really depends on the students' initiative to actually participate since at times I would get lazy and fall behind.

One of the greatest potentials for failure in an online class is the fact that the lack of "going to class" makes it easy to forget about doing assignments and keeping up.

Clearly, a sense of self-discipline was also related to what students thought about their respective academic progress. Many were surprised if not intimidated, at first, by the rapid pace of the online curriculum.

I was very surprised at how fast we were actually able to learn. The course was very fast-paced because of the online environment. It was definitely more than I had ever imagined!

I did not really know what to expect beforehand but the class went a lot faster than I had expected. However, it was really easy to follow since the directions could not be clearer and the curriculum was really organized. It was a great experience and hopefully I will be able to continue next semester.

The beginning of the course went very well and then got very fast after about three weeks, but I enjoyed the challenge. I learned a lot throughout the semester, more than I expected.

However, online learning is not for everybody. One student (who did earn an A) decided that this format was definitely not for him because he needed the constant physical contact of the classroom in order to feel motivated to study. The comments given below drive home the point that one size will never fit all, whether the context refers to an online or in-class format. Students need learning environment choices that best fit their own learning preferences.

I had never before taken a class online, no less a language class and, as they cancelled Arabic at my home campus, this seemed like the perfect class to start with. I have to say that, although I learned a lot throughout the semester, I did not enjoy this class very much. Only speaking with a professor for about two hours a week proved very difficult for me. I have learned that I learn languages best when I am in a classroom setting, talking with the teacher on a much more regular basis, and communicating face to face with my peers. That being said, however, I did enjoy very much the time that we spent in the chats, and especially getting to know my classmates a little through these interactions.

### Student evaluations during the course

As noted in the final FIPSE report (per Dr. Richard Walters, *AWW* project evaluator), four evaluations were given to that 2007 launch cohort at different points in the semester. All sixteen students responded to the pre-course evaluation, twelve students responded to the fifth week survey; seven students completed the mid-semester evaluation; and eight students completed the final evaluation at the end of the first semester. Eleven of the sixteen original students listed English as the language spoken at home. Only three students had previously taken an online course. While personal and educational reasons varied for taking this online course, five students had no access to Arabic instruction in their immediate area, and another five cited the convenience factor derived from taking an online course. Technical problems related to the Arabic keyboard input method or the use of *Wimba* tools surfaced sporadically in the beginning but were solved with relative ease. Seven out of nine students felt comfortable typing online in Arabic, whereas two reported initial problems.

In all of the surveys, students expressed satisfaction with the online materials. Most students responded positively to the online interaction by noting that it provided a more personal approach to learning than in-class instruction and that it offered ample time to interact both with other students and with the instructor (see wiki comments above). Of the eight students who completed the end of semester survey, seven strongly supported the online course in almost every respect. No student stated that the online format was a drawback to the learning process or to their ability to successfully integrate into other Arabic in-class courses. Five students indicated that they would continue with the second semester and three others cited workload or other commitments as preventing them from continuing, although the desire to finish with the online series was still present. Many expressed the hope that an online option for intermediate and advanced materials would also become available soon.

In her end-of-semester comments, the instructor of record and Berkeley Arabic program coordinator, Sonia Shiri, corroborated the fact that the online students had undertaken similar work to those students completing the regular Berkeley in-class curriculum and that both in-class and online students performed within similar parameters. Perhaps the biggest difference between in-class and online students centered around the fact that the online students' grades clustered more on the higher end of the grading scale as opposed to exhibiting the usual distribution pattern (Fall *AWW* Grades: one drop out, 9 As, 2 A-s, 1 B+, 2 Bs, 1 pass, and no Cs, Ds, or Fs).

The five students who continued on to the second semester finished the course with satisfactory results (3As, 1 A- and 1 B+). Four submitted evaluations that spoke to the

satisfaction of taking Arabic in the online format. Although a few of them expressed doubts about their respective listening comprehension abilities, the instructor paired them online with other regular Berkeley Arabic students, as discussed above, and they all communicated without any significant problems. Individual differences notwithstanding, the final outcomes for these online students seemed to be on a par with the traditional in-class UC Berkeley students in a language program. This was verified by examining the week-by-week syllabus plan that was approximately the same for the *in situ* and online students, including the content of the midterm and final exam.

### What happens after an online course?

Students often respond favorably to a course they have just taken with a charismatic or favorite teacher. But what do they think of their learning experience after the fact? We wanted to see what this same group of students from the first-launch cohort thought of their online language learning experience three years after having completed one or both semesters of the *AWW* online course. More specifically, we wanted to know if the online learning was valuable to them and, in the cases where the students went on to study more Arabic, if they felt disadvantaged or at a par with the *in situ* students for having taken introductory Arabic in an online format. Accordingly, a Fall 2011 online survey was sent out to those students who were part of the first-launch cohort.

Of the eight students that responded, all claimed that the *AWW* experience was (1) overall rewarding and felicitous, (2) supportive as a result of the personalized attention awarded during the chat time and over email, and (3) appropriate to prepare them for the next level of Arabic study in a face-to-face conventional classroom or for use in their work/field. Two-thirds of them went on to do more Arabic study in a face-to-face format in programs at UC and elsewhere and completed a second year course or higher. Most reported receiving As in these face-to-face courses, which they cite to argue how well the *AWW* course prepared them for the higher level. The third of the class that did not continue on cited graduate school, work, and/or family obligations as an impediment to pursuing Arabic, but they also remained interested and still engaged with the Arabic language.

When asked about the advantages and disadvantages of the online *AWW* format, some of the students said that they missed seeing their professor and classmates in person, but they also recognized that they would have had no instruction in Arabic without the existence of the online course. Among the most important advantages students listed for the *AWW* online format were that:

- the students need not be present in any given classroom at any given time;
- the class provided fluid and dynamic written interaction—more than in a regular class;
- the course provided convenience, rigor, infinite patience facilitated by the computer and excellent human interaction; and
- the dynamics of a small class size were excellent because pronunciation and typing were valued and emphasized

Perhaps the most gratifying comments originated from those students who continued on with their Arabic study in face-to-face programs:

I actually moved from my first online semester to a campus course and I was very prepared if not more prepared than the rest of the students in the course. The online course was demanding and I would dare to say that the online course had a better quality because it ensured that I spoke Arabic on every chat conversation, whereas there could've been times at my overpopulated Arabic class where I was not given a chance to speak at all in the target language.

I did use in my work what I had learned [in *AWW*].

I got As throughout the [in-class] courses. Unlike many of my peers, I was fully prepared [as a result of the online *AWW* course].

When I joined intermediate level Arabic, I felt I was very well prepared.

When I took the Level 2 course at my college in Texas, I believe I was better prepared when compared with students who had taken Level 1 elsewhere.

One of the respondents, a graduate student in SLA, provided a detailed account of what he deemed to be the strengths of the online format in his experience learning languages in general and learning Arabic with *AWW* specifically. In particular, he singled out the online bimodal chat tool that he credits for supporting a particularly helpful form of class dynamic. First, he commends the highly interactive and *real-life* nature of the small-group chat assignments. He then highlights the uniquely non-invasive feedback afforded by the text chat while audio exchanges are simultaneously taking place—a feature that is very different from *real-life* social interactions. He credits this non-invasive corrective textual feedback for lowering his and the other participants' affective filters and making this virtual environment highly conducive to learning.

The fact that the commentary or corrections are written often [in the chat box] seemed less intimidating, or less stern and, therefore, more approachable to integrate the comment into the student's oral production. The written chat portion of the bimodal chat sessions often functioned as a sort of sub-discourse to the work that is being done orally. It served to clarify misunderstandings, issues of orthography and pronunciation, as well as a sort of ongoing informal conversation ... the format of the chat sessions and the course in general lead to a greater inter-personal relationship between students and the instructor that created a space for language acquisition that surpasses what is found in most traditional language courses.

At Brigham Young University, Kirk Belnap (forthcoming) also reported on a high-school student enrolled in their 2007 *StarTalk* program who then went on to enroll during the year in online *AWW* course given through BYU. This language preparation allowed him to then study in Cairo on a 2008 National Security Language Initiative Youth Scholarship. He was then funded to study in Jordan during summer 2009. In the summer between high school and college, he was certified as an advanced-level speaker and answered every advanced-level item correctly on the NMELRC Reading Proficiency Test, which placed him in the seventh percentile. In other words, the online course articulated well with this student's other courses, allowing him to continue to make progress and reach functional proficiency in the top percentage of his peers. At present, the BYU Independent Study

Program has 77 high school students enrolled in their instantiation of *AWW*, located in 28 states, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The healthy enrollment numbers alone give testimony to the success of the *AWW* materials.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The desire to provide objective evidence that online courses are a valid language learning experience often has driven researchers to try to prove better or equal gains in oral proficiency resulting from the online format as compared to the in-class delivery. However, first-year language learners enrolled in whatever class format manifest a highly variable pattern of individual differences that make assessment a challenging proposition. Frequently lost along the way is the more human and subjective profile of this learning experience. Very few online language courses exist at present, and even fewer online LCTL language courses are available. *AWW* constituted a bold experiment by the University of California and Brigham Young University that yielded surprisingly sound results if student comments, both formative and delayed, are to be believed. While adding more testimonies from a larger cohort of students would be desirable and should be a goal for future studies, the voices presented here paint a positive picture of the online language learning experience: students can learn new languages in an online format and achieve satisfaction in this process.

In light of this present research study, future areas of inquiry with the SLA field include considering to what extent this delivery method can instill students with a sense of bilingual identity and authenticity. Do online students begin to reflect on their incipient bilingualism in the same way that in-class students do? This matter is both a cultural and emotional issue that cannot be measured by the students' grammatical competence. This is purportedly one of the strengths of the classroom and the face-to-face contact with the teacher. Is this relationship and emotional development in the L2 also possible online?

In particular, the students' constant references to the importance of the bimodal chat tool should be underscored; online courses need to allow the participants to exchange and practice language through both textual and audio channels. Interactionist theory holds that negotiating meaning is essential to the success of L2 development (Chapelle, 2005). In the online context, only the CMC tools can provide this. CMC interactions and negotiations fostered by digital exchanges appear to be *sine qua non* for a distance-learning course. In its absence, an online course provides tutorials but the human element is otherwise missing. What is left to further research is to determine whether students feel satisfied by these types of exchanges at the intermediate and advanced level, where pragmatics and kinesthetics become crucially important for communication.

In more general terms, students need to feel that an online course offers them a high degree of interactivity—a vague but useful notion, despite its overuse in the computer-assisted language learning literature (Chapelle, 2005). Interactivity here refers not only to student-computer interactions, but also to student-student and student-instructor exchanges as facilitated by the CMC tool. While a well-designed student-computer interaction allows for flexibility of pace, immediate feedback, and instructional patience, the human element that the synchronous and asynchronous communication tool provides is essential for fostering a supportive and motivating online learning environment, which otherwise might seem too impersonal. The messaging/email function of the course management tool (*Moodle*) also supports learning when used swiftly and clearly by the experienced instructor to address students' questions about the course or about their learning. In other words, we would assert

that the human element in this Arabic online distance course was crucial to securing the high quality learning experience that the students reported. Undoubtedly, other factors contributed to the overall successful learning experience reported here: namely, the online exercises and activities, the user interface, email and forum exchanges, the response time of the instructor, the syllabus organization, and many others. Among these factors, which ones constitute the most essential set of features for a successful online course will have to be determined by future research.

Other reflections stand out from the students' comments. For instance, having access to online exercises and activities is also extremely important for success in learning online, both for the high-verbal and low-verbal students, so as to allow for faster or slower processing times, respectively. Together with a precisely organized syllabus that helps keep students on track, students themselves can take responsibility for keeping up to date with the relentless pace of the online curriculum.

Although we predict that online language courses will not displace the more traditional in-class delivery formats, the profession should realize by now that virtual options are becoming part of the teaching landscape and, therefore, should be well articulated with the rest of the curriculum. In the case of launching the *AWW* online course, many colleagues along the way doubted the value of this endeavor, without actually being able to point to any personal experience with online course delivery. That is why we have gathered here the reactions from the students themselves in an effort to begin to identify a set of the best practices for teaching language online and, in particular, for teaching a LCTL online.

Undoubtedly, online courses will vary wildly as a function of instructors, materials, articulation needs, and a continuously evolving set of technical affordances. We all need to remember that *in situ* classes also vary considerably, although they are more familiar to all of us so that we tend to presume an inherent superiority of the face-to-face format. Hearing about successful online courses is one way that the profession can become informed, not so that everyone can teach online or study a language online, but rather so that a language program's curriculum provides students with as many options as possible to expand their access to language study. One of the principle benefits of *AWW* is that instructors in traditional courses can also make good use of additional online materials, which means everyone can benefit from this avenue of curricular development. The students like to vote with their feet, but they cannot do that without options. The profession must adapt the curriculum to serve their needs while at the same time capitalizing on the advances offered by new technologies, especially where LCTL languages are concerned.

## REFERENCES

- Belnap, R. K. (forthcoming). *Middle East language learning in higher education*. Provo, Utah: National Middle East Language Resource Center.
- Blake, R. (2008). *Brave new digital classrooms: Technology and foreign-language learning*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Blake, R. & Delforge, A. (2007). Online language learning: The case of Spanish without walls. In B. Lafford & R. Salaberry (Eds.) *The art of teaching Spanish: Second language acquisition from research to praxis* (pp. 127-147). Georgetown: Georgetown University Press.
- Blake, R., Wilson, N.L., Cetto, M., & Pardo Ballester, C. (2008). Measuring oral proficiency in distance, face-to-face, and blended classrooms. *Language Learning & Technology*, 12(3), 114-127.
- Blake, R. & Arispe, K. (forthcoming). Individual factors and successful learning in a hybrid course. *System*.
- Brustad, K., Al-Batal, M., & Al-Tonsi, A. (2004a). *Al Kitaab: A textbook for beginning Arabic, Part One*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Georgetown University Press.

- Brustad, K., Al-Batal, M., & Al-Tonsi, A. (2004b). *Alif Baa: Introduction to Arabic letters and sounds*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Georgetown University Press.
- Carr, S. (2000, February 11). As distance education comes of age, the challenge is keeping up with the students. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A3. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v46/i23/23a00101.htm>.
- Chapelle, C.A. (2005). Interactionist SLA theory in CALL research. In Egbert, J. and Petrie, G. (Ed.) *Research perspectives on CALL*, (pp. 53-64). Mahwah, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum Associates.
- John, O. P. & Srivastava, S. (1999). The Big-Five trait taxonomy: History, measurement, and theoretical perspectives. In L. A. Pervin, & O. P. John (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (pp. 1-71). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Sieloff Magnan, S. (2007). Reconsidering communicative language teaching for national goals. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91 (2), 249-252.
- Shiri, S. (2010). Arabic in the USA. In K. Potowski (Ed.), *Language diversity in the USA* (pp. 206-222). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

APPENDIX A: Handwriting sample of connect-the-letters exercise form *Alif Baa*

**DRILL 9. DVD**  
READ THESE WORDS ALOUD (ACROSS FROM RIGHT TO LEFT):

حَبِيبَتِي	حَبِيبِي	وَاجِبَات	ثِيَابِي	يَحْتُ
تَبْوَحِي	جُيُوب	جَيْبِي	ثَوَاب	حَيْثُ
تُجِيبِي	وُجُوب	بُيُوت	بَيْتِي	بَحْتُ
جَوَابَات	جَوَاب	جُمُتْ	يَجِبُ	خَابَ

**DRILL 10. DVD**  
CONNECT THE FOLLOWING LETTERS TO FORM WORDS. THEN LISTEN TO THE WORDS ON DVD AND WRITE IN ALL THE SHORT VOWELS THAT YOU HEAR.

1. حَابِت	=	ج + ا + ب + ت
2. حَبَّاب	=	ح + ج + ب
3. خُوخ	=	خ + و + خ
4. ثِيَابِي	=	ث + ي + ا + ب + ي
5. جِيُوتِي	=	ج + ي + ب + و + ت + ي
6. حَبِيبَتِي	=	ح + ب + ي + ب + ت + ي
7. بُيُوت	=	ب + ح + و + ت
8. وَاجِبَات	=	و + ا + ج + ب + ا + ت
9. بِيُوت	=	ب + ي + و + ت
10. جِيُوب	=	ج + ي + و + ب

**DRILL 11. DVD**  
DICTATION.

1. _____	3. _____	5. _____
2. _____	4. _____	6. _____

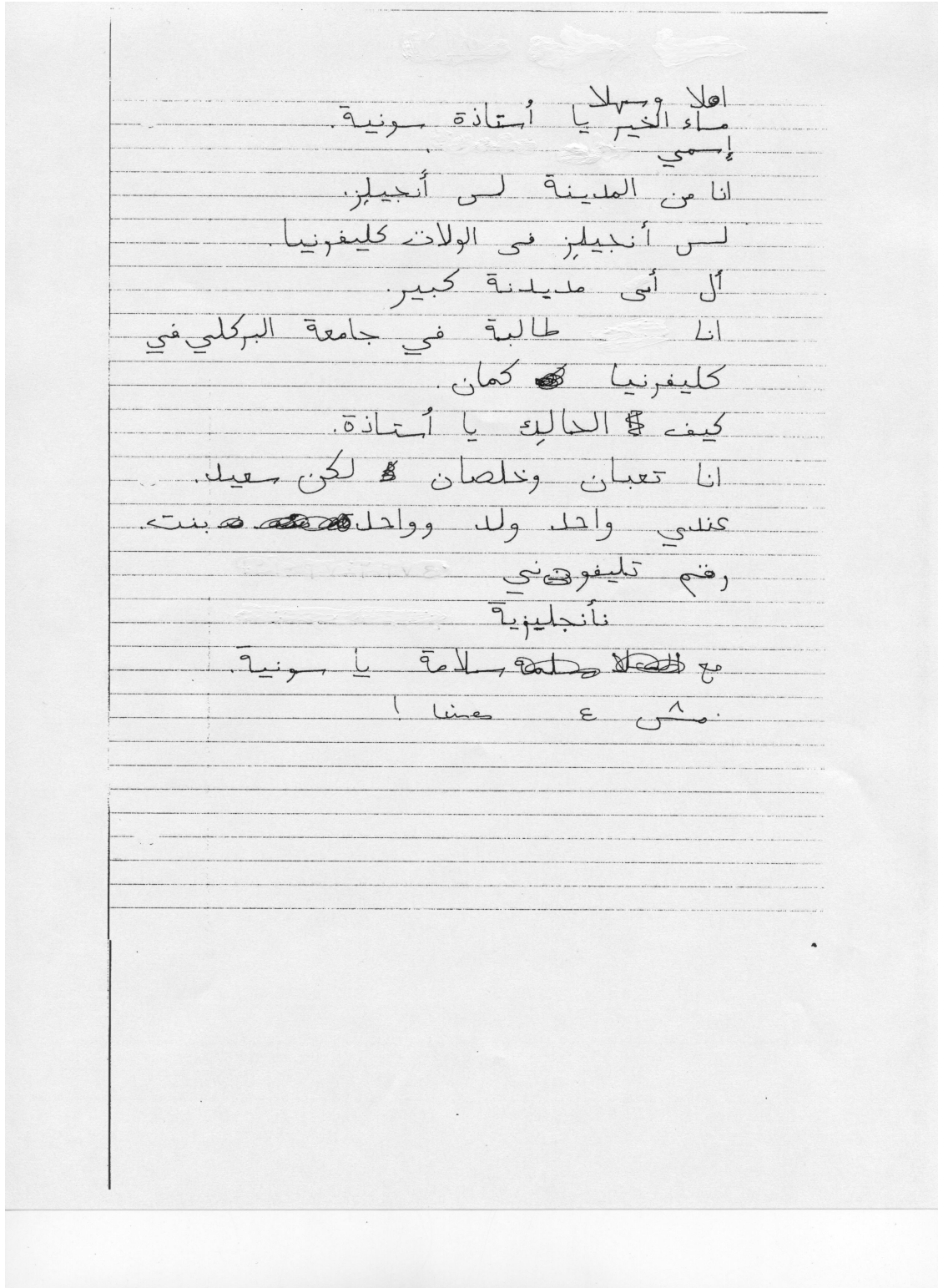
**PEUGEOT** | **بيجو**

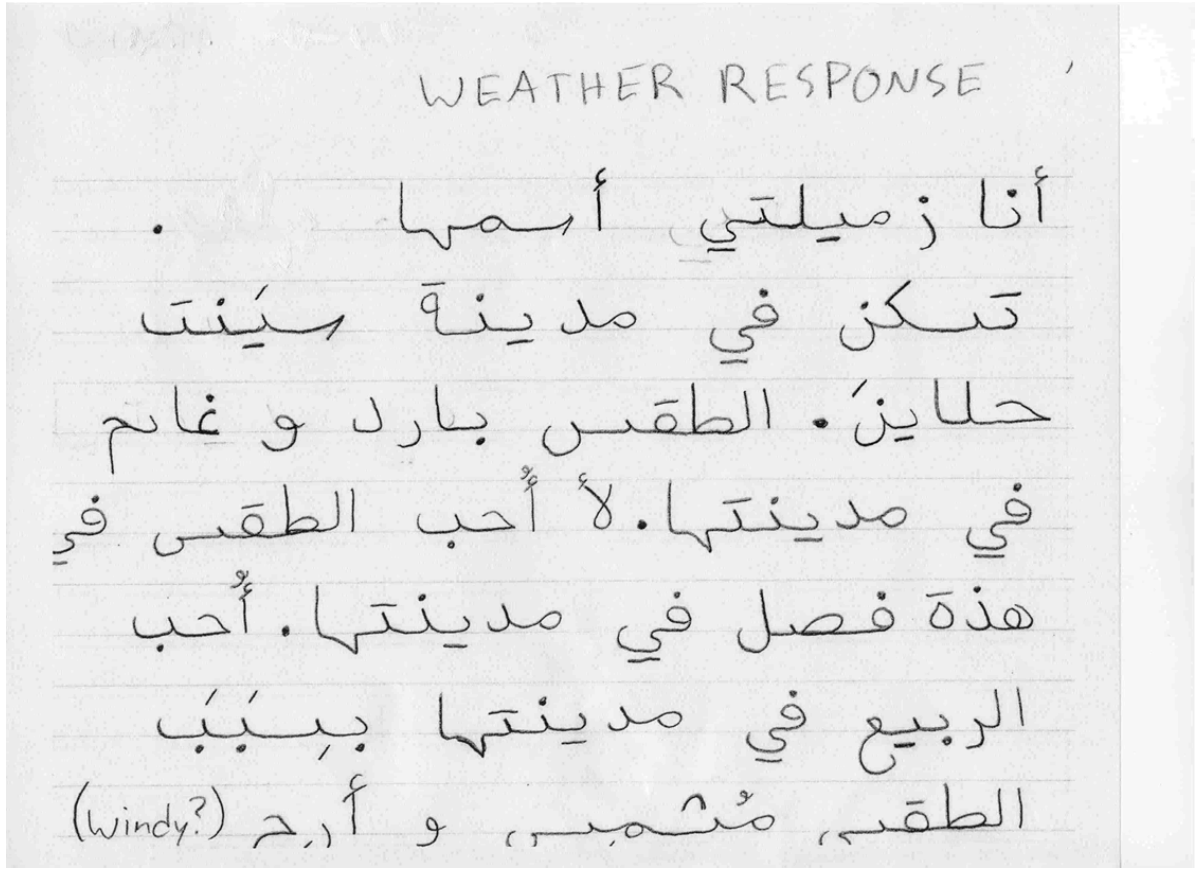
**VOCABULARY DVD**  
GO TO THE VOCABULARY SECTION ON YOUR DVD AND CLICK ON THESE WORDS TO LISTEN AND LEARN THEM.

حَبِيبَتِي	حَبِيبِي	وَاجِب	بَيْت
------------	----------	--------	-------

- 38 -



**APPENDIX B:** Handwriting Sample, Student introduces herself to instructor

**APPENDIX C: Handwriting Sample, Weather in Classmate's Area****APPENDIX D: Typed introduction of a friend****Composition (Part 2 of 4) (25 points)**

Write about 60 words to introduce one of your friends in Arabic. Be sure to include information about your friend's hobbies and likes and dislikes. Be creative.

أُسكن أنا. الإسبانيّ الأدب [name] تُدرّس حيثُ الارجنتين في مندوثة مدينة في تُسكن هي. طفولتي صديقة المتحدية الولا إلى تُسافر لا ليلى. كثيرة الرسايل نُكُتِب ولكننا سنّوات ثمانية منذ المتحدية الولايات في ألى الاستماع تُحب ولكنها هواية لها وما جِدًا مشغولة هي. وزوخ وابن بنتان لها. الطائرات تُحب لا لأنها التسوير تُحب ل أنها هواية لها الحديقة في. المساء في أسرتها مع المُسيفة

**Translation** (with only spelling errors corrected): [Name] is my childhood friend. She lives in the city of Mendoza in Argentina where she teaches Spanish literature. I have lived in the United States for eight years but we write many letters. [Name] does not travel to the United States because she does not like planes. She has two daughters, one son and one husband. She is very busy and she does not have a hobby but she likes to listen to music with her family in the evening. In fact, she has one hobby because she likes to draw.