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## Serving the Less-Commonly-Trained Teacher: Perspectives from Arabic Instructors

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## Serving the Less-Commonly-Trained Teacher: Perspectives from Arabic Instructors

### Abstract

As proficient speakers of less-commonly-taught languages seek to meet the demand for qualified instructors, they face a range of personal and professional challenges. In an effort to understand the perspectives of these instructors and their particular educational experiences and needs, we conducted a phenomenological case study of two aspiring Arabic teachers. Specifically, we sought insights into their lived experiences, their motivations for pursuing a graduate degree, their attempts to connect coursework with pedagogical practices, and their needs in terms of professional development. Our findings illuminate the intersecting objectives these instructors must achieve. They need to position themselves as qualified candidates for the available positions as instructors, but they also need to reconcile a number of different roles as they develop their teacher identities and connect their backgrounds to ambitions for students' growth. As teacher educators, we find that we need to facilitate career placement as well as the negotiation of these roles.

### Keywords

Case Study, LCTL, Arabic, Teacher Identity, Transcendental Phenomenology

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## Serving the Less-Commonly-Trained Teacher: Perspectives from Arabic Instructors

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*As proficient speakers of less-commonly-taught languages seek to meet the demand for qualified instructors, they face a range of personal and professional challenges. In an effort to understand the perspectives of these instructors and their particular educational experiences and needs, we conducted a phenomenological case study of two aspiring Arabic teachers. Specifically, we sought insights into their lived experiences, their motivations for pursuing a graduate degree, their attempts to connect coursework with pedagogical practices, and their needs in terms of professional development. Our findings illuminate the intersecting objectives these instructors must achieve. They need to position themselves as qualified candidates for the available positions as instructors, but they also need to reconcile a number of different roles as they develop their teacher identities and connect their backgrounds to ambitions for students' growth. As teacher educators, we find that we need to facilitate career placement as well as the negotiation of these roles. Keywords: Case Study, LCTL, Arabic, Teacher Identity, Transcendental Phenomenology*

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Many less-commonly-taught languages (LCTLs) have seen such dramatic growth over the last two decades that the demand for qualified instructors and quality materials has outpaced supply. Among these, Arabic enrollments and programs have expanded faster than any other foreign language, with six-fold growth in the first decade of this century (Goldberg, Looney, & Lusin, 2015). While there is a long tradition of teaching Arabic in the U.S. for the purposes of scholarship and in religious contexts, the recent expansion has clearly been driven by sociopolitical concerns. As a result, the diversity of individuals who choose to study Arabic and the complexity of their motivations have expanded along with their numbers.

More than a decade ago, Allen (2007) stated that “Arabic is now firmly on the public screen, and universities, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and pre-college schools, both primary and secondary, are taking an interest in Arabic and Islam” and, consequently, “they are all seeking help, guidance, and advice from the small number of those who possess expertise in the Arabic language and its pedagogy” (p. 260). Since then, Arabic instructors have made strides in designing curricula, developing materials, and establishing effective pedagogical practices (Wahba, Taha, & England, 2006). Meanwhile, many new instructors have sought to enter the field via traditional and non-traditional paths.

Becoming a master teacher of any foreign language is fraught with challenges, particularly for aspiring teachers who have high levels of proficiency in the language but little training in pedagogy. Teaching a foreign language effectively involves a constellation of skills that has not been fully explored and mapped, particularly in regard to LCTLs. Linguistic proficiency, as complex as it is, accounts for only a fraction of the pedagogical knowledge and abilities that teachers need in order to successfully promote second language acquisition. Aspiring teachers need to be able implement their knowledge to serve the needs of various learners, and they must reflect on their practices in order to grow (De Felice & Lypka, 2013; Murphy, 2014; Olsen, 2016).

For proficient users of the target language who want to begin careers as instructors, what barriers do they face as they seek professionalization in the field? How do they go about building the pedagogical skills that will complement and mobilize their linguistic skills? What credentials can they and must they gain in order to demonstrate these skills to administrators who might hire them as instructors?

The research we discuss here provides insights into the challenges faced by current and prospective teachers of Arabic. Focusing on two specific emerging professionals, it aims to identify many of the issues and challenges that such instructors face and to shed light on their professional development needs. As faculty in a master's program for teachers of many foreign languages, we hoped that this process of inquiry would inform our own curriculum and the issues raised by these individuals will resonate with the experiences of others who aspire to teach Arabic and other LCTLs.

### **Common Challenges for Aspiring Teachers of LCTLs**

Arabic instructors, like instructors of many other prominent LCTLs such as Chinese, Korean, and Russian, share a range of difficulties that are not relevant for teachers of commonly-taught languages. In addition to the small-number of qualified teachers, there is a much narrower selection of materials, including textbooks and technological resources, and much less research on effective instruction for learners of these languages. At the same time, there is a widespread belief that these languages may require far more time on task in order for learners to reach levels of proficiency that will sustain the use of these languages for professional purposes. Almost all of these languages use orthographic systems that differ considerably from that of English, share very few cognates, and open up sociocultural and pragmatic considerations that will be unfamiliar to many U.S.-born learners. Because these languages may require a greater length of commitment, learners may not have access to opportunities to study their chosen LCTL continuously throughout their education.

Meanwhile, few teacher-training programs are equipped to prepare teachers of LCTLs, in language-general (multilingual) or language-specific modes. Native speakers may find their proficiency questioned along with their pedagogical preparation. Those who have reached high levels of proficiency through instruction may be able to show university transcripts and degrees, but they will still need to prove their language proficiency on assessments such as the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) from the certified testing program of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Among other organizations, ACTFL advocates for an exit level of Intermediate High in oral proficiency for LCTL teachers, as compared to Advanced Low for teachers of commonly-taught languages (Glisan, Swender, & Surface, 2013). This distinction reflects the greater perceived difficulty of these languages and the lower supply of qualified teachers. However, measures of proficiency cannot prove pedagogical expertise. Without appropriate channels for professionalization, aspiring LCTL teachers may not be able to acquire or demonstrate their skills as instructors of these demanding target languages.

### **Specific Challenges for Aspiring Teachers of Arabic**

Each language also brings up a separate set of issues to be explored and navigated in the classroom. The phonology and writing system of Arabic can baffle English-dominant learners (Hansen, 2010), and instructors who are themselves immigrants to the U.S. must transition to the U.S. educational system and may use pedagogical methods that are also unfamiliar to learners (Haley & Ferro, 2011).

Two features of Arabic have led to broader and more intractable pedagogical challenges, however. The first is the way in which speakers of Arabic use multiple varieties or dialects in different ways, especially in having a distinction between a high prestige variety versus a low prestige variety as seen in the diglossic nature of language in the Arab world, and the second is the role of Arabic as the lingua franca of Islam. According to Ryding (2006), successfully acquiring Arabic involves developing proficiency in both Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the variety associated with education and literacy across all Arabic-speaking countries, and at least one colloquial variety that is specific to the geographic region where the learner wants to be able to communicate. Balancing the two leads to pedagogical dilemmas and, often, frustration for learners (Ryding, 2006). While there is a growing acceptance that both MSA and spoken varieties should be included in Arabic curricula (Shiri, 2013), decisions about which varieties a given instructor should teach and how the two (or more) varieties should be integrated remain contentious.

Due to the religious significance of Arabic and Arabic instruction, there is a long history of teaching Arabic language in mosques and other Islamic centers throughout the Muslim world. As the language of the Qur'an, Arabic carries a high level of spiritual and cultural significance, and Muslims who are not able to use Arabic communicatively are frequently able to and expected to recite long passages of their holy book in the original (Sehlaoui, 2008). Heritage learners of Arabic in the U.S. may attend hours of classes every weekend in which they learn to read Arabic phonetically and explicate texts. While these learners and their families may be highly motivated, their motivations differ from those of other learners of Arabic as a foreign language, and the classroom practices and communicative outcomes can vary considerably from secular contexts of learning (Lanier Temples, 2013).

This diglossic situation and the significance of Arabic for Muslim learners mean that instructors may face a wide range of variation in the prior exposure and expectations of learners who enter their classrooms. Many will be true beginners and typical foreign language learners. Heritage language learners may or may not speak the language at all, though it carries cultural significance for them (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003). When they do, they may know a colloquial variety but not MSA, and in one classroom many different colloquial varieties may be represented. Learners who have studied Arabic in religious contexts may be literate and yet unable to speak the language. Others may come from Christian Arab families that may or may not speak Arabic at home. Their intentions for using the language and their expectations for instructors can vary just as widely.

### **Professional Development Opportunities and Obstacles**

Although many federal, private, and not-for-profit organizations have made considerable investments to promote Arabic instruction, many of these efforts have the learner in mind rather than the language instructor (Valosik, 2014). As a critical language, Arabic is supported by government agencies and programs under the U.S. State Department and the Department of Defense. The federally-funded Flagship programs and Critical Language Scholarship Program are aimed at helping learners reach high levels of proficiency. Initiatives such as the thriving STARTALK program, overseen by the National Security Agency, do provide training and curricular guidance for instructors as well as language instruction. However, published research that focuses on the actual or perceived professional development needs of Arabic language instructors is still very limited.

Though this study focuses on Arabic, we strive as teacher educators to understand and address the challenges that all of our students face in their classrooms. Interviewing our primary informants and collecting a range of artifacts from their graduate work helped us to gain a more

detailed and specific understanding of their educational experiences, their efforts to become professionals in the Arabic teaching field, and their perceived needs as instructors.

### **Method**

We chose to investigate the lived experiences of these teacher educators through an interpretivist case study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016). Because our primary interest was in the educators' experience, and we were familiar with many aspects of their experience, we used this phenomenological, interpretivist case study to help us become more familiar with their sense-making of the time they spent studying in a graduate program while also moving toward embarking on a new career. We also chose this method because we were interested in exploring a complex, sensitive area of concern that requires a deeper understanding of the participants and their challenges within their academic and professional lives. By identifying this particular area of concern, we found an interpretivist case study approach appropriate because we sought to investigate the experiences of LCTL teachers (specifically for Arabic) and various aspects of professionalization (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016). Lastly, we were interested in analyzing many types of data including documents, interviews, and physical artifacts (Stake, 1995). All of these considerations led us in developing an in-depth description of our participants that we hoped provided a new level of understanding for us as educators and teacher trainers.

With our focus on the lived experience, we employed Moustakas (1994) and his modification of the van Kaam method for the data analysis. This analysis method led us to a composite description that captured the meaning and essences of the experience for Bassem and Ruba. In addition to the modified data analysis method from Moustakas, we engaged "in systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments" (p. 22) because we are language educators ourselves and these efforts were especially important given our proximity to our informants, our connections to the graduate program, and our prior experiences. Lastly, we used phenomenological analysis to examine the phenomenon in question from multiple perspectives in order to achieve "a unified vision" of the experience our participants had (p. 55).

Given that we are teacher trainers as well as researchers and that we are their instructors in a program that may meet some of those needs, we pursued lines of questioning that had to do with their lived experiences, their life histories and their careers as well as their decisions to obtain an advanced degree in foreign language teaching. We sought deeper understanding in regard to one main question and two sub-questions:

- 1) What are the lived experiences of aspiring Arabic instructors in pursuing a new career while completing a graduate degree program?
  - a. What challenges do these aspiring Arabic instructors face as they strive to move forward in their field?
  - b. What are their professional development needs, and what role is their master's program playing in meeting those needs?

As we investigated each of these questions, we aimed to consider and compare emic and etic perspectives on the challenges and needs of these informants. As researchers, we hope to contribute to a broader understanding of teacher development, specifically in regard to LCTLs such as Arabic. As teacher trainers, we also hoped to gain insights into ways that our program could meet these needs more effectively. While our own pedagogical decisions were not a direct target of this study, we have considered the inevitable additional question: what should teacher educators do in response to these challenges and needs? In the conclusion of this paper, we offer some suggestions, though implementing and evaluating them will be a matter of further investigation and reflection.

## Participants

As designated by our institutional review board (IRB), our study was exempt from a full review because it fell under research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings (i.e., category 1-1). Our informants were also part of research on the effectiveness of curricula, which fell under a research exemption from our institutional review board. With an abundance of caution, we still provided our participants with a consent form and we outlined the voluntary nature of the research project. We provided them with the guidelines we followed to ensure their safety, privacy, and confidentiality that included procedures for data storage, the steps we took to anonymize the data, and their participation in member checking. The two informants on whom this study centers were both enrolled in the master's program in which we are faculty. While they cannot be seen to represent the full variety and complexity of aspiring Arabic instructors, the similarities and differences in these teacher-learners' backgrounds and professional goals bring up issues and considerations that others will also face. Their experiences and perceptions thus offer a lens through which we can analyze the phenomenon of LCTL teacher professionalization.

We refer to our focal informants as Ruba and Bassem, pseudonyms that they selected (see Figure 1). Both of them happened to be natives of Egypt who had immigrated to the U.S. in adulthood. They had both completed undergraduate degrees in Egypt, but they were trained in science and technology rather than in language, linguistics, or education. In both cases, they had decided to pursue employment as Arabic teachers after their arrival in the U.S., but their job experience so far was limited to private tutoring and short-term positions. In many ways, these two instructors were similar in terms of their experience, background, and educational levels, but they differed in their teaching styles, their primary concerns as instructors, and their career goals.

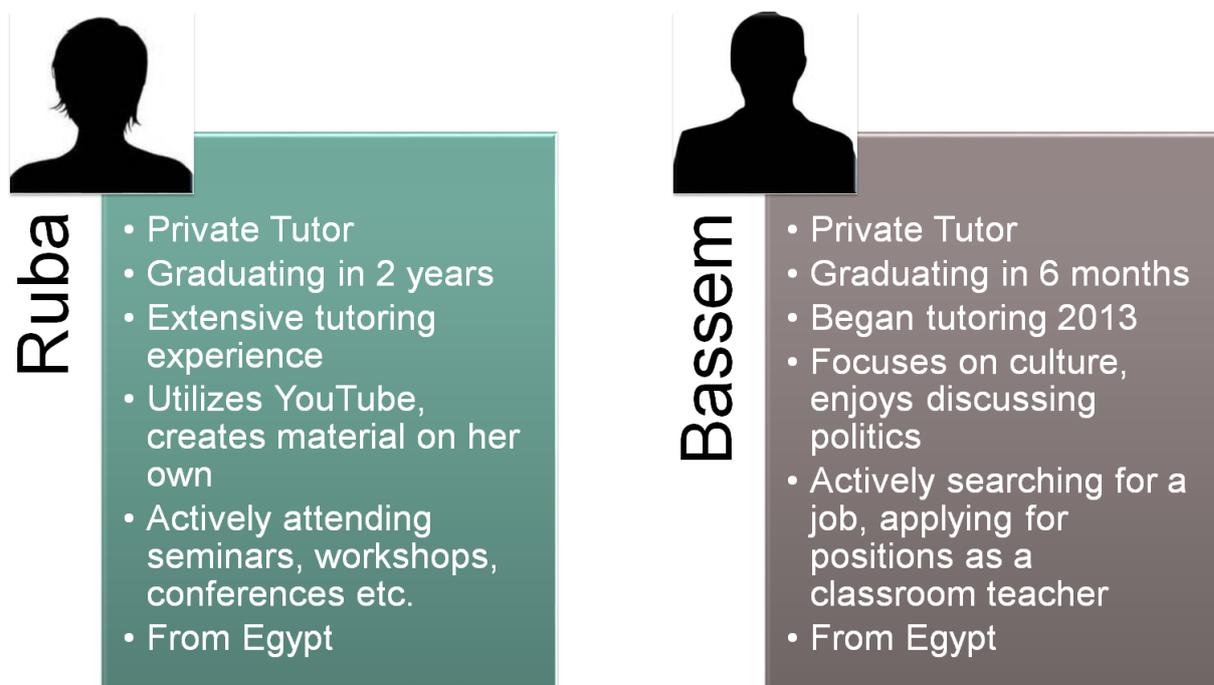


Figure 1. Overview of participants' experience, background and future plans.

Ruba lives on the east coast, in a suburban area close to multiple major research universities. By her own account, Ruba's family is very active in their community and has a wide and diverse circle of friends. She and her husband are both Muslim, and they have a boy and a girl who attend public schools as well as weekend Arabic classes. Though she had a consistent pool of clients as a tutor of Arabic, she stated that her priority was her family, and that finding a full-time position was not yet a goal. When she did envision a more permanent position, she mentioned public K-12 schools and private Islamic schools. She chose to pursue her graduate degree slowly, one course at a time, but she engaged thoroughly with the course material, strove to complete assignments in creative and pedagogically sound ways, and consistently challenged herself while also supporting her classmates, including Bassem.

Bassem, in contrast, was racing to complete the program and felt far more pressure to enter the job market and find a full-time job that would pay a living wage. His wife, an American engineer, was expecting their first child, and he had been working in other fields to earn income while he studied. At the time of this study, he was actively looking for teaching positions for the next academic year, with very limited success. Though he had sought out opportunities to work as a tutor on a volunteer basis, overall he had far less experience as a teacher than Ruba. Also unlike Ruba, he envisioned himself teaching advanced learners at the university level. As an Arab Christian, raised in an oppressed community in Egypt, he was adamant that his approach would be secular and politically unbiased. Overall, he was very concerned with sociopolitical and cultural issues and how they would impact the content and methods of his work as an Arabic instructor.

## **Data Collection**

As faculty in their degree program, we had taught Bassem and Ruba in numerous courses, and we have each spent many hours interacting with them for various reasons from program advisement to discussions on course-related material to job search assistance. However, our main source of information came from the semi-structured interviews we conducted for this study. We used virtual interviews as our primary data source for two reasons. First, our participants are distant from us geographically, and, second, we work together virtually for our class work, which meant we were comfortable conducting these interviews virtually. We used voice-over-internet protocol (VOIP) tools including Skype and Zoom, both of which allowed video interaction and audio recording.

In addition to these interviews, we sought secondary source material such as teaching philosophies and lesson plans they had submitted. During the interviews they also mentioned numerous resources (e.g., textbooks, teaching materials or internet links like YouTube videos, etc.). In some instances, our informants specifically referred to material from courses they took with us. We considered all these artifacts in our analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

We transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews in their entirety using a combination of voice-recognition software, transcription software, and audio editors. The transcripts alone amounted to about 18,500 words, and we supplemented these with artifacts the students had produced in their coursework and reflections on our interactions with these learners in an array of situations.

Upon completion of the transcripts, the review of the materials and documents our participants provided, we followed the Moustakas modification of the analysis steps from van Kaam (Moustakas, 1994). With a final product being a composite description of the experience of our participations, we began by listing and grouping the relevant expressions using a

spreadsheet as the analysis tool outlined by De Felice and Janesick 2015 and 2016 and De Felice, 2012. After reducing and eliminating expressions, we clustered the remaining expressions using a process of iterative analysis to identify emergent themes corresponding to our overarching questions. Upon completing a final identification of the invariant constituents, we wrote an individual textual description, an individual structural description, and a textural-structural description for each participant. We used these textural-structural descriptions to write up a composite description for the participants as a whole.

### Presentation of Data

We include examples from within each of the analysis steps that are verbatim and illustrate not only our process in conducting the analysis, but highlight the data that led to our synthesis of the meanings and essences of aspiring Arabic instructors in pursuing a new career while completing a graduate degree program?

### Horizontalization

We reviewed every statement (or horizon) from the transcripts and gave them equal value as long as they were related to our research questions. Using the steps in Moustakas (1994) and the procedures for using a spreadsheet in De Felice and Janesick (2015), we created the following example table.

Date	Line Number	Participant	Complete Transcription
28-Mar	187	Amanda	so you would say that most Arabic teachers that you know are kind of self-taught?
28-Mar	188	Ruba	yes and the ones that I only know two that they came with a teaching degree from back home they teach the language in a different way then I don't want to say the way it's supposed to be taught but it's different it's kind of got grammar and they're very dry [?]
28-Mar	189	Amanda	ok and so ok if you could if you could if you were asked to do a short training program if you were asked to do some kind of very practical training program for teachers like that what kinds of things would you include in that training program what do you think they need to know
28-Mar	190	Ruba	well the central thing what they need to know that they I always remind myself because I am saying this because this is my assignment for the last module so I have this on my mind [?] and I recognize that unconsciously because we all came from a background when we were taught a foreign language we had been taught a different way and in a different environment than here so it's not easy for us and I have to admit to always be conscious and say okay what is my goal and who do I teach and I go backward the backwards design I've been reading about also [?] here I collect because simply it does make sense it's common sense so we have to remember that we have to remember what are the goals are the goals for the students to write very grammatical sentence structure and they are going to be graded on that or and do we have different goals to go out and communicate and go be ready for the workforce in another country that speaks the language
28-Mar	191	Amanda	okay okay and so there's more of a focus now for you on functions on communication on
28-Mar	192	Ruba	basically absolutely

As this type of analysis requires reduction and elimination, we completed these steps prior to importing our transcripts into the spreadsheet. Using a document, we blended together the horizontalization, the reduction, elimination, and the formation of meaning units using highlighters and markings in a hard copy from the original transcripts. Once we had identified that expressions that met the requirements of it being necessary and relevant. In addition, there must have been a possibility “to abstract and label it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). We also removed any repetitive or vague statements.

### Clustering of Horizons into Themes

Entering this phase of analysis, we began working the invariant constituents to cluster them under a related label or theme. Across both participants’ experience, we found their experience was related to four overarching themes that included the challenges they faced entering the job market, negotiating roles, encouraging growth, and gaining experience. We illustrate these four themes in figure 2. In addition to the overarching themes, we identified various sub-themes that helped us better understand the lived experiences of Bassem and Ruba. These sub-themes are also in figure 2. We would use these sub-themes to guide our individual textual descriptions as we often found sub-themes from within the words and expressions of our participants. We provide examples of our clustering and thematizing of the invariant constituents below.

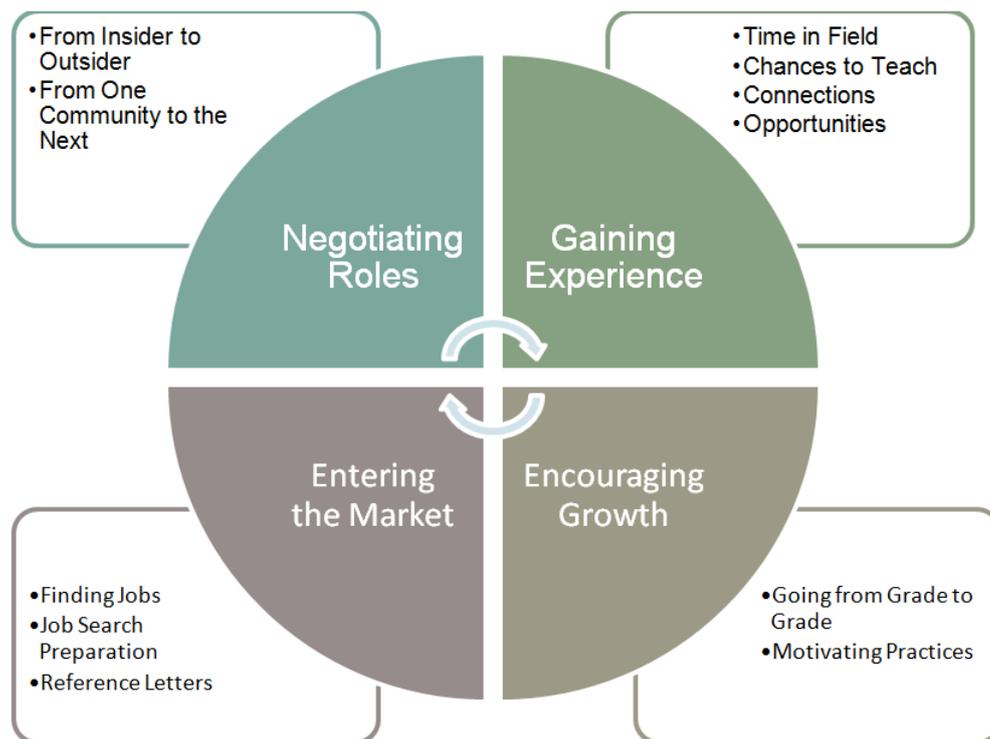


Figure 2. Themes and subthemes from qualitative analysis.

As the focus on a future career became a predominant theme found throughout the interview process with Ruba and Bassem, we developed our first theme that we called “entering the job market.” Under this theme we clustered expressions like these:

## Entering the Job Market

**P 1: Bassem-Amanda interview\_edited.rtf - 1:12 [it's still new like learning t..]**

it's still new like learning teaching Arabic in the United States is still a new field because before September 11 like I'm sorry to say it people who were like my friend was teaching Arabic before September 11 to the Army till he got a taxi job like that means 15 years ago you know a taxi job was better than teaching Arabic you know and now when I use

**P 1: Bassem-Amanda interview\_edited.rtf - 1:24 [I found that there is a lot of..]**

I found that there is a lot of uh very good chances actually like the market is very big and it seems like that's what I found it's really big and like everywhere now

**P 1: Bassem-Amanda interview\_edited.rtf - 1:25 [now I was little bit frustrate..]**

oh my God like like universities I've never heard about like recent- lately I've applied for a university in Santa Clara you know like I've never I've been in Santa Clara but I never would have imagined that they have an Arabic program you know @@ there is like in my field as Arabic instructor there is a lot of jobs lot of jobs across the States

**P 3: Ruba-Amanda interview\_3-28-14.rtf - 3:18 [you've been around other Arabi..]**

yes and the ones that I only know two that they came with a teaching degree from back home they teach the language in a different way then I don't want to say the way it's supposed to be taught but it's different it's kind of got grammar and they're very dry

## Individual Textural Descriptions

Upon completing the previous steps, we moved into the individual description phase where we crafted a vivid description that included the words and phrases of our participants. We provide an example individual textural description from Bassem below.

The experience of pursuing a new career while completing a master's degrees for Bassem is one of negotiating roles, gaining experience, entering the job market, and encouraging student growth. In pursuing a new career, Bassem felt he needed that a degree would be a natural step in finding employment as an Arabic language teacher. He began looking into careers teaching Arabic when he moved from overseas to the US. He found his "career options limited" and decided to pursue teaching because a friend had gone from being a taxi driver to teaching in the early 2000s. He thought he already had "an asset" in being "a native speaker." He "thought this was an easy deal" to enter the teaching field

due to his skill level in Arabic, his variety of spoken Arabic, and his passion for working with highly fluent speakers. He also believed that the market for Arabic instructors was still growing quickly and that this field would provide meaningful and stable employment. He insisted that “teaching Arabic in the United States is still a new field.” Although he regrets the sociopolitical reasons for the recent upswing, he believed it raised the potential value of his Arabic skills: “my friend was teaching Arabic before September 11 to the Army till he got a taxi job. That means [back then] you know a taxi job was better than teaching Arabic.”

### **Individual Structural Descriptions**

With the establishment of the individual textural descriptions, we began fabricating an individual structural description that was a vivid account of how their experience made them feel. Using imaginative variation and the individual textural descriptions as a foundation, we focused on writing about the underlying dynamics of their pursuit of a new career while completing a graduate degree program. We provide an example individual structural description from Ruba below.

Regarding Ruba’s experience with negotiating roles as they relate to language, Ruba is a native speaker of Arabic yet a language learner for English. Even with her superior level abilities in Arabic (specifically Egyptian Arabic) and her high level abilities in English, she finds herself with conflicting challenges. While her dialect of Arabic is an asset for many learners, it can also create challenges especially when she takes on a tutoring assignment that requires a different dialect. She encountered these tensions multiple times as she sought out opportunities to tutor Arabic through heritage speakers in her local area. At times, she is able to function with the use of Modern Standard Arabic, but she often feels that she comes up lacking when parents ask her to teach about another culture, another country, and/or another dialect of Arabic. For her English abilities, she functions competently within her home community through English in the US and within the graduate coursework she took in pursuit of a master’s. However, her interactions in professional settings have been less than satisfactory because students can comment on her perceived accent or they draw attention to her perceived flaws in her English.

### **Composite Textual-Structural Descriptions**

Having the individual textual and structural descriptions crafted, we moved to the penultimate step in the analysis. This step focused on providing a composite textual-structural description for both participants. We used this step to construct the essence of their experience through the incorporation of the textual and structural descriptions, the invariant constituents, and the themes and sub-themes into one description for each participant. We provide an example composite textual-structural description from Bassem below.

Bassem’s initial job search seemed to confirm his belief that the field was growing and accessible. He was surprised to find how many universities and other institutions were offering Arabic as a foreign language: “like universities I’ve never heard about... I never would have imagined that they have an Arabic program.” Despite the apparent abundance of available positions and his

persistence in applying to them, he was unsuccessful in finding a position before graduation.

As his educational background shows, he is a lifelong learner who relishes opportunities to learn. This attitude toward learning was evident in the way that Bassem began to reflect on his earlier tutoring opportunities where his confidence in the way he presented himself was very different from the way he saw himself after working through coursework specifically on methods and techniques for teaching a language. As he learned more about the field of language teaching, he began to develop his own idea for an ideal curriculum and he began to emphasize new aspects of teaching that included instructional objectives, rationales for methods, and even a focus on comprehension and less so on the linguistics of the language.

He attributed this outcome to his lack of classroom teaching experience. His experience as a tutor, though eye-opening for him, was apparently less valuable in the eyes of potential employers than experience as an instructor of his own course. Although he expressed the problem of “chasing [his] tail” with laughter in his voice, he is describing a profound tension that is in fact “really hard” for emerging professionals in this field.

### **Synthesis of Meaning and Essences of the Experience**

This final step in the process is the composite essence of both participants that is a vivid presentation of the textural and structural meanings in a synthesis of the meaning and the experience of pursuing a new career while completing a master’s degree. Our full synthesis is below and we organized the synthesis around final themes.

#### **Language as part and parcel of the essence.**

Pursuing a new career teaching Arabic in the U.S. requires a lot of negotiation in the language of instructional, the language of practice, and the language of access. Being a native speaker becomes a benefit in some ways while a detriment in others. As speakers of Egyptian or the misri variety of spoken Arabic, many opportunities present themselves because this variety is often popular among U.S. learners. In addition to this variety, speaking Modern Standard Arabic adds to the opportunities available. However, the number of learners who seek out another variety could be an opportunity that may be unavailable. Whether it is parents, administrators, or even students themselves, the desire to learn about one’s own culture or heritage means many seek out speakers who can connect them to the language of their homeland or their family and educators cannot “customize themselves”. They are who they are and they are the results of their upbringing, their schooling, and their families. Their challenge becomes learning how to best work with students that “come from different backgrounds, different countries like a mom from Lebanon who wants to teach her son to talk Lebanese and write Lebanese and live Lebanese.” If one is not Lebanese, how does one become a conduit for passing on a cultural identity to heritage language learners and helping them gain access to valued cultural groups? The parents of these learners expect much more from the tutoring process than an increased ability to read and use Modern Standard Arabic.

As a native speaker of Arabic, many interactions still occur through English outside of the classroom. From meeting with potential clients and students to navigating professional development and coursework, the ability to use English at a high level is yet another

responsibility as well as a necessity. Even within the classroom, English use becomes a salient challenge as students, learners, and parents can comment on a perceived accent or draw attention to possible flaws in grammar or word choice. With students, this can often lead to misbehavior in the classroom or to moments that the instructor must “negotiate meaning with about that” and that “it's okay, I teach you Arabic and definitely you're more than welcome to add to my knowledge in English. There's nothing wrong with that.” Even with these challenges the essence of pursuing a new career in teaching involved putting aside any doubts about English proficiency. “my point is even if you have an accent, but your knowledge is solid and you know what to do and how to do it, I think there's always potential, and that's what Arabic teachers need to have as goals.”

### **Religious background and the distance it may create.**

In some cases, Arabic teachers find themselves at a distance to their learners depending on their religious upbringing and their desire to teach the language and culture separately from religion. Even though, these teachers may speak passionately about beliefs, lifestyle, and the Muslim community, they may tend to avoid teaching religious beliefs and texts in Arabic lessons. One reason is that these teachers are not experts in religion because “I'm not a scholar, really. I don't teach religion because I'm not good at it. You know it has to be something that I'm really really sure about- [but] I can find the linguistic skills that I want to enforce and we can integrate some materials, and we do songs and we do stories for children [including] the Prophet's stories.” The idea of separating the teaching from religion was an experience each teacher navigated and even explicitly stated their position on the separation in documents such as a teaching philosophy because “teaching Arabic language as a means of human communication” means “I will never be a part of any kind of political correctness or advocacy of the Islamic religion or Arab culture.” Making a choice to include or not include religion is contingent on their own background.

### **Feeling of outsidership in educational settings.**

Being an Arabic teacher and a native speaker from Egypt led to a feeling of being an outsider to the culture of teaching at K-12 schools and even university level class. While some Arabic teachers have exposure to the school or university system through friends and families, others do not. This limited exposure does not provide enough information to quell the feelings of “outsidership.” Studying alongside other teachers from the U.S. who teach languages like Spanish and French brings out the impression that these individuals have insider information that revolved around classroom structure, assessment, among others. With their educational experiences occurring in other countries, these teachers looked for more interactions, more discussions, and more connections to a U.S. classroom environment. “-I really think [is] that less-commonly-taught language teachers really need to be in the environment around [the] classroom much more than what's accessible for us now.” Some of the teachers of Spanish and French had not only grown up in the K-12 system in the U.S., but they also obtained degrees in education that may have included a focus on language. These experiences can feel like they had advantages over many LCTL teachers because of this possible prior training in language teaching and, perhaps more importantly, they were more familiar with the U.S. culture of education: “I'm definitely happy for them that...they're teaching in an environment that they have been learners in this environment before so they are familiar with the classroom structure, the assessment, the authenticity, everything... since they were in kindergarten... it's familiar to them, it is not familiar to me.”

### **Path to seeking an advanced degree.**

Their path towards an advanced degree was rooted in their earlier experiences with education. Both started and/or completed degrees in a variety of unrelated fields from their home country. In some cases, they had had received scholarships or other job opportunities before and believed in the value of education to help them chart a new career path. Recognizing that they would need to get experience and build expertise, both educators tutored or worked with students in small groups in a variety of settings that included universities, at homes, and schools. These experiences were often not enough as they sought more classroom time because they “wanted more time with the students” and gave “like a lot of hours just free... as long as they wanted to meet or stay in the session.” From earlier experiences combined with these new experiences in the U.S., these educators were surprised to find this new career path became a strong desire once they started working with learners. In fact, they often reveled in talking to these students for hours about multiple topics that could include politics and cultural practices.

While these experiences with students were good ones, they realized that not only would their limited experience with teaching be a problem for future employment, they also began to perceive the importance of having an advanced degree and its influence on the overall job search. In addition to the practicality of looking for a job, they found themselves working hard to support their tutees and students’ learning while also providing them with opportunities to communicate meaningfully. The graduate degree became even more important as they began to realize their limited training in pedagogy and experience in teaching may not only hinder their ability to meet their tutees and students’ needs, but limit their possible job opportunities.

### **Impact of coursework on daily practice.**

As these educators engaged in courses (either one course at a time or multiple per semester), they would start to revisit those resources with a fresh perspective. As they felt their skills were expanding in developing materials, they found themselves in a position to deliver them in new ways that included more dynamic approaches to error correction/teacher feedback, more ways of keeping learners relaxed and talkative, and more techniques in reaching teaching goals. In their daily practice, they found themselves exploring new paths because “my goals are expanding and my skills are expanding, so I can not only focus on songs but I can find something else. And it could be a lecture, could be a movie, a cartoon, so the variety is there.” They began to look into incorporating many more authentic materials into their teaching. Other courses also focused on the theories and approaches to foreign language teaching and they allowed them to describe, consolidate, and refine the lesson planning and materials development that they began prior to learning about these important areas. “I go back always to my lesson plans. Every time I learn something, I go and I tweak it and I adjust where I need to. I’m adding and enhancing those.”

As they learned more about the field of language teaching, they began to develop ideas for an ideal curriculum where they emphasized new aspects of teaching that included instructional objectives, rationales for methods, a greater ability to interpret meanings in Arabic conversations and texts along with critical cultural awareness, and even a focus on comprehension and less so on the linguistics of the language. In fact, the educators specifically note that there is “more sensitivity to the affective elements of language instruction as they strive to lower anxiety and increase motivation.” These kinds of changes made a difference in their classrooms, especially in the “effort in making the students open up and have confidence.”

Through the connections made from within the materials covered in the graduate coursework, these educators have also changed their approaches to error correction and other forms of teacher feedback that facilitate learning: “I’m making sure that I’m remembering all

the techniques to help them correct their mistakes in a positive way, and then... they are more relaxed and more talkative.” Some aspiring educators came prepared in various ways prior to engaging in graduate coursework. For instance, some have already developed and implemented lesson plans, activities, and materials for use with tutees. With this background, the educators could focus on student needs by increasing learner motivation, lessening anxiety, and increasing the complexity of teaching techniques. Many of these aspiring Arabic educators are lifelong learners who relish opportunities to learn themselves. This attitude toward learning was evident in the way they began to reflect on earlier tutoring opportunities where their starting confidence in the way they presented themselves was very different from the way they saw themselves after working through coursework specifically on methods and techniques for teaching a language.

### **Importance of finding a job as a main outcome.**

While the graduate degree was a goal for these aspiring Arabic educators, their main goal in seeking the credential was to pursue a new career. These educators thought a graduate degree was a natural step in finding employment as an Arabic language teacher. This perspective was shaped in part by their initial experiences upon arriving in the U.S. They met friends and listened to family members talk about how native speakers had left behind jobs in other industries to begin teaching Arabic. Without teaching Arabic, these educators believed that other "career options were limited." In one story, a friend had gone from being “a taxi driver to teaching in the early 2000s.” “My friend was teaching Arabic before September 11 to the Army till he got a taxi job. That means [back then] you know a taxi job was better than teaching Arabic.” They also thought that the market for Arabic instructors was still growing quickly and that this field would provide meaningful and stable employment because “teaching Arabic in the United States is still a new field” and that the perceived upswing in demand for Arabic teachers raised the potential value of their language skills. In this way, they thought they already had "an asset" in being "a native speaker," which would make the possibility of securing a job “an easy deal" due to their skill level in Arabic, their variety of spoken Arabic, and their passion for working with learners.

### **Difficulty in finding employment.**

Their earlier experiences as tutors were eye-opening and fruitful for them, but they were apparently less valuable in the eyes of potential employers than experience as an instructor of their own courses in either a school or university. Many of their concerns stemmed from challenges brought on by this lack of experience. Both educators had gained lots of experience tutoring and interacting with students in conversation sessions, but they often lacked experience running a full classroom. For instance, they hadn't put together a lesson plan, articulated a curriculum, or provided an assessment for example. Their experience included lamenting on the barriers for entering the teaching field because jobs required experience to be hired yet there were few opportunities to gain experience, an experience illustrated by the problem of “chasing [his] tail.” In many cases, they were willing to volunteer to gain that experience, but few opportunities presented themselves throughout their studies. “I would take a volunteer job in any university for a whole year you know... [or] just with minimum wage.” They often sought out some additional help in the form of networking and in support from the graduate faculty in connecting them to the campus they were linked to. These faculty could have used their professional networks and the status of the institution to find or create opportunities to complete an internship or work as a teaching assistant: “Your college has a very prestigious position... why you guys don't take advantage of this and link the students?”

## Summary, Implications, and Outcomes

Ruba and Bassem both believed that the market for Arabic instructors was still growing quickly and that this field would provide meaningful and stable employment. Bassem insisted that “teaching Arabic in the United States is still a new field.” Although he regrets the sociopolitical reasons for the recent upswing, it has raised the potential value of his Arabic skills: “my friend was teaching Arabic before September 11 to the Army till he got a taxi job. That means [back then] you know a taxi job was better than teaching Arabic.” Joining the master’s program in which we teach was one of numerous steps that Bassem and Ruba had taken along their paths into this swiftly-changing arena.

Entering the field by gaining employment was only one aspect of these informants’ development as teachers, however. They both perceived themselves as outsiders negotiating their way into U.S. society and into specific teaching situations. We saw this perception in the way they described themselves, their professional experience, and their career goals. For both informants, their national, cultural, and religious identities impacted their interactions with others and their priorities as Arabic teachers.

In Bassem’s view, the content that teachers choose to provide regarding religion and culture and the way in which they address this content are contingent on their own backgrounds:

It depends usually on the instructor point of view, his political orientation, religious orientation, socioeconomic orientation. From his background, he has to speak about his background... so it's usually a personal effort and not a curriculum effort you know.

At this point, he went on to argue that language programs should agree on standards and sequences for the teaching of culture and intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence. However, his insistence that the instructor’s background is relevant reflects Morgan’s (2004) argument that teacher identity is pedagogy. According to Morgan (2004), a teacher’s identity “is a pedagogical resource for bilingual and second language education” (p. 174). Individual teachers should not be seen as representatives of a population of language users, and both informants emphasized that they do not see themselves in this role. Morgan (2004) warns that “identity risks being commoditised, perceived by new teachers as a ‘value-adding’ set of socio-pragmatic skills for cross-cultural entrepreneurship,” (p. 177). However, their backgrounds become resources in the sense that they can provide a counter-narrative to prevailing stereotypes and offer new possibilities for interacting with Arabs and Arabic speakers.

While Bassem was more likely to frame his need for experience in terms of the strength of his job credentials, he also felt that he needed more experience in order to improve his effectiveness as a language teacher. He asserted that he would be willing to work on a completely voluntary basis in order to gain this experience: “I would take a volunteer job in any university for a whole year you know... [or] just with minimum wage.” To that end, he wanted us as faculty to use our professional networks and the status of our institution to find or create opportunities to complete an internship or work as a teaching assistant: “Your college has a very prestigious position... why you guys don’t take advantage of this and link the students?” Although we had repeatedly expressed our willingness to write letters of recommendation and to help students consider the advantages of various options, after this conversation we began to discuss ways that we could offer other forms of assistance.

Both Ruba and Bassem also noted that their level of proficiency in English also impacted their ability to navigate their way through daily life and in academia. They were both more than capable of completing coursework at the graduate level, including lesson plans,

research papers, and presentations, but their own self-assessment of their linguistic ability did not match their achievements. Ruba stated that “Well, I don't speak fluent English. I have an accent and there are still things that I'm learning.” At times her students would misbehave or draw attention to flaws in her English: “they can pick [up] on this and they try to negotiate meaning with me about that, so I tell them that, well, it's okay, I teach you Arabic and definitely you're more than welcome to add to my knowledge in English. There's nothing wrong with that.”

Bassem and Ruba have clearly found that the path to professionalization is far longer and more treacherous than they had anticipated. As at least one of them was surprised to find, employers seeking Arabic instructors can afford to be more selective in their hiring decisions today. A high level of linguistic proficiency is only one of many criteria that might be used in this selection process. Whereas Allen (2007) described a situation in which “graduate students and native speakers... find themselves given a textbook and thrust into a beginning-level classroom” (p. 260), these days higher levels of educational qualifications and experience seem to be required.

In addition, prospective employees might be judged on the particular combination of linguistic skills that they bring and their ability to balance them in the classroom. Curricula at various levels have begun to balance their traditional emphasis on MSA and address learners' needs more effectively by offering instruction in spoken varieties of Arabic. However, a given teacher's linguistic skills may not align with students' preferred varieties, which can depend on family background, parents' preferences, educational experience, and students' intended destinations for study abroad and work. Furthermore, these informants believed that their English language proficiency might reduce their chances of being hired, even though their expertise is meant to be in Arabic language and pedagogy.

Once hired, novice teachers can also face serious challenges. Aspiring teachers like those in this study who were raised and educated in other countries lack familiarity with the educational system in which their students have grown up. It is difficult under any circumstances to prepare for teaching in K-12 and university environments without actually doing so and receiving constructive feedback. Because Arabic is perceived to be a very difficult language for U.S. learners and the time to proficiency is so long, teachers need to be even more skilled in their pedagogical practices. They need to pay attention to promoting communication, teaching strategies, and maintaining motivation in learners.

## **Limitations**

First, as is the case with any phenomenological study, our assumptions are not generalizable to other language educators. The educators who contributed to this study are unique in both perspectives and personal life histories. Second, phenomenological perspectives always depend on self-reported data. Our analysis is rooted in the willingness of these educators reveal their beliefs, thoughts, experiences. Additionally, we struggled with separating ourselves from the educators because we are language faculty ourselves and we worked closely with these participants throughout their graduate studies. While we employed a variety of techniques available to phenomenologists and qualitative researchers, we believe the nature of our interactions with our study participants may have influenced our analysis and discussion.

## **Implications for Teacher Educators**

From the beginning of this study, we hoped that the results would inform our practice as educators of foreign language teachers. The nature of our program demands that we understand the needs and challenges that impact teachers of many different target languages,

including commonly-taught and less-commonly-taught languages. By focusing on Arabic in this study, we were able to increase the depth of our insights into the experiences of aspiring teachers of this specific language, but those insights may well extend to other teachers as well.

We must maintain a high level of expectations for these teacher-learners, but we must also encourage them as they strive to expand their expertise and their confidence in that expertise. Our courses currently focus on many aspects of masterful teaching, including teaching methods, assessment, curriculum design, culture and intercultural competence, and instructional technology. Across courses, we emphasize awareness of prevalent standards (ACTFL, ILR) and the use of task-based language teaching and other communicative approaches.

As an online program, we can serve aspiring teachers who live around the world and, like both Ruba and Bassem, are not able to move in order to pursue their studies. While we previously considered practicum experiences and career services to be beyond the scope of our program for the most part, we need to consider ways to support learners as they seek experience in the environments in which they want to teach. Like Bassem's course design project on Arabic in the media, the major projects that serve as capstones to the program are customized to the teacher-learners' needs and interests and have helped students to develop skills in creating materials and planning curricula and to interact with current teachers of their target language.

Graduate programs for aspiring teachers can offer exposure to theory and practices, opportunities to apply them, and some guidance in career decisions. Reflective teaching is also an important part of the toolkit that programs should provide. As Ruba put it herself, "for me to enhance my ability to be a teacher, I have to be in an environment where I can teach and I can learn from my experience." Experience in and of itself may not make them better teachers, but the process of reflecting deeply on their practices, evaluating them based on newly-encountered concepts and approaches, and seeking ways to make them more effective will certainly benefit them and their students.

These informants are eager to teach effectively, extensively, and with a high level of concern for their learners' growth. Both instructors and peers can offer support to aspiring teachers as they attempt to reach those goals and construct their identities as foreign language instructors, particularly in the case of Arabic. This study enlightened us as researchers and teacher educators, but at the same time the process may have afforded opportunities for the informants to reflect on their emerging identities as teachers and to rehearse their commitment to serving their own learners despite the challenges of teaching Arabic.

In the future, we can further expand our understanding of their needs by tracking their development in the field and studying the alignment between their beliefs and their practices using additional methods such as journaling, observations, and interviews with their students. The sociopolitical context of Arabic language instruction is just as complex now as it was when the current upswing began. The field continues to grow in terms of size and professionalization, and we hope that these informants will be able to contribute fruitfully to it now that their graduate studies are complete.

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