

LEARNING ARABIC IN THE UAE

Consistently ranked among the hardest languages to learn, Arabic is spoken by around 420 million people worldwide. So, for those able to reach conversational levels or higher, Arabic is useful across large swaths of the globe – as well as in tasty restaurants everywhere.

As a language with various – and sometimes wholly distinct – accents and dialects, the Arabic language can be complex and intimidating, lyrical and beautiful. Aspiring Arabic speakers in the United Arab Emirates have a few options along their language-learning journey.

This Expatica article on Arabic worldwide and in the UAE will give you the linguistic overview you need to decide if you'd like to scale this peak.

- Languages spoken in the UAE
- Where Arabic is spoken worldwide
- Origin and history of Arabic
- Arabic pronunciation/phonology
- Arabic grammar
- Arabic dialects
- Interesting facts about the Arabic language
- Learning Arabic in the UAE

What languages are spoken in the UAE?

The UAE is a true melting pot of cultures, languages, and people. Arabic is the official language of the land, however [less than 12%](#) of the country's population is composed of Emirati locals. The rest is composed of people from all over: India and Bangladesh, Egypt and the Philippines, Ireland and the US, to name a few. Most expats find that they can manage very easily by using only English since, for example, road signs and other important information are displayed in English as well as Arabic. Though exact figures are unknown, the number of UAE residents who speak Arabic as their first language (including Emirati and non-Emirati Arabs) is believed to be between 20% - 30%.

Other commonly spoken languages include Hindi, Malayalam, Urdu, Pashto, Tagalog, and Bengali.

Where Arabic is spoken worldwide

Combining native and non-native speakers, Arabic is spoken by approximately [420 million people](#) worldwide, making it the 5th most spoken language in the world. It is recognized as an official language in more than 25 countries – most of them across the Middle East and North Africa - and is used in many more. Arabic is also the language of Islam, and the more than [1.6 billion](#) Muslim faithful pray or read the Koran in Arabic.

Arabic is the [6th most popular](#) second language in the world, with many universities in Western countries offering majors and concentrations in Arabic, Middle Eastern Studies, Security Studies, and the like.

Origins and history of the Arabic language

Arabic is a member of the Semitic family, alongside languages like Hebrew and Amharic, and has been around for over 1000 years. Within world languages, it is a member of the Afro-Asiatic group

and is believed to have sprung from the Arabian Peninsula; in fact, the word ‘Arabic’ itself means nomadic, a historic lifestyle in the Arabian Gulf.

That said, Arabic was just one of many other languages spoken in the region at the time – and historians are still debating how, why, or when it became widely used orally. Historians are also unclear of when Arabic as a written script first came about, since the language was primarily used orally. The written history of Arabic became much clearer after the year 632 CE when, according to the Muslim faith, the Prophet Mohammed received the Koran directly from God – and wrote it down. The version of Arabic that the Prophet recorded is still considered “Classical Arabic” to this day.

Through this written religious text and through the ensuing Arab Conquests, [Arabic spread quickly](#) across the world.

Arabic pronunciation/phonology

The Arabic language, written from right to left, is formed through 18 distinct shapes that, combined with certain dots placed above and below, comprise the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet. Once you have mastered the sounds that correspond to the letters, Arabic is entirely phonetic.

Consonants form the base of most Arabic words; most of these consonants (for example, b, f, h, sh, th) are familiar to English speakers.

For example, the word for ‘book’ is *kitab*. It is pronounced *kit* (like the English word) – *ab* (like the English abbreviation for *abdominal*)

The vowels, and the glottal stop, which would be unfamiliar to English speakers, form much of the reason for Arabic’s reputation of being a difficult language.

For example, the word for the number ‘four’ is *arbaa*. It is pronounced *ar* (like the English word *are*) – *baa* (a sound that is formed deep in the throat and has no English equivalent).

Arabic grammar

In Arabic, every noun is either masculine or feminine and both nouns and adjectives change form to match gender, number, or state. There are also 12 personal pronouns (for example, I, you, you all (male), two people (women), and we), making perfect grammar in Arabic a mighty task indeed.

Arabic has both nominal (beginning with a noun) and verbal sentences (beginning with a verb), though there is no word for ‘to be’, instead its meaning is understood from context. In verbal sentences, the subject is expressed within the conjugation and may never be mentioned separately. Grammatical particularities such as these make for a steep language learning curve.

Arabic dialects

Although Arabic is spoken throughout the world, there are three categories of the language: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Koranic Arabic, and Colloquial Arabic. MSA (also called *fus-ha*) is derived from the Koran and is the version taught in schools in Arabic-speaking countries; you will also encounter MSA in newspapers and government correspondence. Koranic Arabic is found in Islam’s holy texts and during prayer. Colloquial Arabic (also called *lah-ja*) is the version that Arabic-speakers grow up using; it is the language of daily life and is sometimes virtually unintelligible between countries, especially countries that might have adopted elements of former

colonizer languages, like French. An Omani might find it impossible to understand the Colloquial Arabic spoken in Morocco, for example. Arabic in the Levant (Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq) has its own unique linguistic quirks, as does Arabic from the Gulf (Oman, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Yemen), Egypt (Egypt, Sudan), and North Africa (Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Algeria).

Interesting facts about the Arabic language

- The most commonly spoken Arabic dialect is Egyptian.
- Arabic is written from right to left but numbers are written from left to right.
- The number system that English uses is Arabic numerals; conversely, the number system that Arabic uses is Hindi numerals.
- Spanish has about 4,000 words of Arabic origin.
- Arabic has more than 10 words for love – and more than 100 for camel!

Learning Arabic in the UAE

Expats living in the UAE have various options to learn spoken and/or written Arabic; they also have options to choose Gulf Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, or a different dialect.

Most people in the UAE speak English and relatively few speak Arabic. Though the number enrolling in Arabic classes is rising, a poll conducted by local newspaper [Khaleej Times](#) reported that 81% of those polled hadn't ever taken an Arabic course.

Inroads into learning Arabic are a beautiful gesture and method of getting closer to Emirati culture, as well as Emirati friends and co-workers. This is especially true because many expats find themselves spending several years in the UAE. In smaller Emirates, such as Ras al Khaimah or Ajman, which host fewer expats, Arabic would take you even further.

Useful resources

For some Arabic pronunciation practice, check out the following resources

<https://www.rocketlanguages.com/arabic/pronunciation>
<https://www.arabicpod101.com/arabic-pronunciation/#introduction>

If you're interested in knowing more about Emirati Arabic specifically, check out these resources

<https://alramssa.ae/free-lessons-spoken-emirati/>
<https://www.gulfarabic.com/>

Language Institutes in the UAE

[Eton Institute](#)
[The Mother Tongue Center](#)
[Bertiz Language Centers](#)
[The Arabic Language Center](#)
[Meetup.com Language Groups](#)