Examining instructional contexts and student beliefs in Arabic teacher recruitment

Michele Back, University of Connecticut
Brahim Oulbeid, Mount Holyoke College

Abstract

Although enrollments in Arabic postsecondary programs in the United States increased substantially in the early 21st century, the lack of robust teacher training, combined with an ongoing decline in world language (WL) enrollments overall, has underscored the need for continued teacher recruitment in Arabic and other less commonly taught languages (LCTLs). In this exploratory study we evaluate student perceptions of WL teaching through the partial implementation of Arabic-language teacher recruitment modules based on ACTFL’s Educator Rising 2.0 initiative, as well as the role of instructors and instructional contexts in this implementation. Although survey findings did not show a significant increase in interest in becoming an Arabic teacher, interviews with the instructors and two focal students point to the importance of instructor context and student history in the success of teacher recruitment initiatives in Arabic classrooms. We conclude with recommendations for future research and LCTL teacher recruitment.

Keywords: teaching Arabic as a foreign language, language teacher recruitment, language teacher training, Educators Rising, language teacher shortage, student perceptions of teaching


Introduction

Despite the numerous personal and professional benefits of learning an additional language (ACTFL, 2019b; Stein-Smith, 2021), a complacency toward the need to learn languages other than English prevails in the United States (Altschuler & Wippman, 2022). Stein-Smith (2021) explained that although many Americans support foreign language learning, college students remain unaware of the benefits of language study due to many factors, including:

- the lack of foreign language programs in U.S. public elementary and middle schools, the lack of foreign language requirements for high school graduation in several states, and the lack of college admission foreign language requirements in many colleges and universities (p. 52).

These gaps correlate with an ongoing decline in world language (WL) enrollment numbers in U.S. K–16 contexts (Altschuler & Wippman, 2022; American Councils for International Education, 2017; Looney & Lusin, 2019). Although interest in learning Arabic increased after the terrorist attacks of 2001 (Furman et al., 2007), Arabic enrollments have recently declined by 5.9% (Looney & Lusin, 2019).

Declining enrollments also correspond to an ongoing WL teacher shortage at all levels of instruction, with studies revealing WL teaching positions as some of the most difficult to fill (Commission on Language Learning, 2017; Kissau et al., 2019; Swanson & Mason, 2018). The reasons for the WL teacher shortage partially mirror those of the overall teacher shortage in the United States, including disinterest in the
teaching profession, concerns about the financial viability of teaching, and a debilitating rate of attrition for existing teachers (Kissau et al., 2019). Moreover, several unique factors exacerbate WL teacher recruitment, most notably concerns over target language proficiency and the perceived lack of necessity to learn a language other than English, as described previously.

With regards to Arabic teaching, given the limited number of programs at the K–12 level, both teacher recruitment and student interest in teaching the language do not normally begin until postsecondary education. When enrollment in postsecondary Arabic classes grew in the early 21st century (Furman et al., 2007), resulting in a shortage of qualified teachers, many institutions resorted to hiring what Ryding (2018) termed “newcomers to the field,” primarily heritage speakers with little teaching experience (p. 12). Many new learners of Arabic were also strongly encouraged to consider teaching in graduate school, where a lack of formal training in pedagogy led some of them to feel intimidated, rather than empowered, to teach (Oulbeid, 2018, 2021). Therefore, teacher recruitment initiatives that focus on less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) such as Arabic could be a structured way to advocate for the profession with language learners.

In this exploratory study we evaluate undergraduate student perceptions of WL teaching through the implementation of teacher recruitment modules in Arabic based on ACTFL’s (2019a) Educators Rising 2.0, a series of curricular modules aimed at fostering WL teacher recruitment, as well as the role of instructors and instructional contexts in this implementation. Using data from surveys of undergraduate students of Arabic and from interviews with Arabic instructors and focal students, we analyzed whether classroom exposure to teacher recruitment modules played a role in changing perceptions about teaching in general and WL teaching in particular. Because the purpose of Educators Rising 2.0 is to increase interest in becoming a WL teacher, we sought to understand how such modules could be incorporated in WL classroom contexts, as well as the extent to which they encourage students to consider a career in language teaching. We discuss implications for further implementation of teacher recruitment modules and WL teacher recruitment in general.

**Literature Review**

**World Language Teacher Recruitment**

Previous literature on teacher recruitment has focused heavily on the perceptions of existing teachers or teacher candidates (e.g., Guarino et al., 2006; Kissau et al., 2019; Wronowski, 2018; see Back & Dean, 2020, for a more complete review). Less present in the literature are studies that examine reasons why non-teachers or non-teacher candidates may or may not choose teaching as a career. Findings from previous studies suggest several areas needing additional focus in teacher recruitment. First, beliefs about teaching, particularly in the United States, appear to substantially depress student interest. Kissau et al. (2019) investigated the motivations of 403 world language teacher candidates from Germany, the United States, and China. Although several motivational factors were similar across cultural contexts, including love of the target language and perceived social contribution, the authors also found that U.S. teacher candidates expressed the strongest belief that teaching is a difficult job and the weakest belief that teachers have a high salary or social status (p. 194). Long (2000) noted similar beliefs among U.S. WL postsecondary faculty, who “do not want to associate” with their colleagues in Schools of Education due to “pervasive snobbery” and the perception of education being “every student’s second choice” (p. 434). To address this, Swanson and Mason (2018) called for more collaboration among local and national language associations and universities, as well as the need to increase reporting on the successes of teacher recruitment efforts. This sentiment was echoed by Stein-Smith (2021), who stated, “as the scholars and experts on foreign language at any institution, it is the foreign language faculty who are best qualified to play a leadership role in any postsecondary foreign language initiative or campaign” (p. 53).

Furthermore, Swanson and Mason (2018) noted the important role that language teacher associations, such as ACTFL, could play in furthering language teacher recruitment and point to ACTFL’s Educators Rising
2.0 initiative as one way in which this is happening. Educators Rising (2020) is a U.S. organization that facilitates teacher recruitment through curriculum and activities targeting high school students. ACTFL’s version of Educators Rising, titled Educators Rising 2.0, specifically targets prospective WL teachers, with a curriculum consisting of 10 modules, including slide shows and interactive worksheets (ACTFL, 2019a). Even though these modules were originally designed for high school students, they are easily adaptable for undergraduate postsecondary language learners. However, because the ACTFL modules are in English, it is difficult to integrate them into WL courses, where potentially interested learners coexist with instructors concerned with maximizing target language use. Thus, providing recruitment materials in the target language could help instructors scaffold learners’ exploration of language teaching as a profession and aid their development in the language, leading to increased interest in this career possibility.

Recognizing the need for a target language recruitment curriculum, Back and Dean (2020) implemented a modified, Spanish language version of Educators Rising 2.0 in high school Early College Experience Spanish classes to examine its effectiveness on WL teacher recruitment. Findings pointed to a significant increase in student interest in WL teaching in the treatment group, demonstrating the materials did an effective job in convincing or reaffirming student beliefs in the value of learning languages and in the chance to have a positive impact by joining the profession. The authors did, however, find four areas where the program did not sufficiently address student concerns: classroom management/working with children, the level of language proficiency needed, salary, and workload. These findings suggest that WL teacher recruitment programs could increase their attention on these topics.

The implications of these and other studies (e.g., Swanson, 2012; Swanson & Moore, 2006) are clear: Student preconceptions of the profession depress their interest in WL teaching, postsecondary instructors can contribute to these negative preconceptions, and successful recruiting approaches should provide information from multiple stakeholders that counter said preconceptions. Moreover, teacher recruitment needs to begin when students are starting to consider career possibilities so that they might obtain the necessary professional training in a timely manner. Countering negative preconceptions about teaching, involving postsecondary faculty, and introducing teacher recruitment into language classrooms are three areas of need that this study addressed.

Arabic Teaching and Learning in the United States

In this section we provide a brief overview of the field of teaching Arabic language as a foreign language (TAFL) in the United States. Similar to other historical moments in the United States, such as the launching of Sputnik in the 1950s and the oil embargo in the 1970s, student enrollments in learning Arabic as a foreign language started growing toward the end of the last century (Welles, 2004). Interest in Arabic started before 9/11 but became stronger immediately after 2001, when Arabic language was labeled as a critical need foreign language (Allen, 2007) for U.S. security agendas (Al-Batal, 2007). Welles (2004) noted that between 1998 and 2002 enrollments in Arabic programs at U.S. colleges and universities increased by 92.3%. As Goldberg et al. (2013) reported, enrollments in Arabic programs saw a surge from 10,585 in 2002 to 34,908 in 2009. In this situation, it was difficult to find well-trained Arabic educators to both teach courses and develop materials to meet the teaching and learning needs of the field (Alhawary, 2013; Belnap, 2007; England, 2006).

Recognizing the pressing need for instructors of Arabic, other critical languages, and LCTLs, the Bush administration created the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) in 2006. One key NSLI program was STARTALK, which provides teacher development summer programs to in-service and novice teachers (Mana, 2011). According to Ellis (2016), the purpose of STARTALK is to “improve and expand the learning and teaching of languages that are strategic to the U.S.” (p.85). To this end, some programs offer language instruction, some provide teacher training, and some offer both. In the case of Arabic, 2165 teachers received training between 2007 and 2014 (Ellis, 2016), mostly to in-service teachers at the K–12 and postsecondary levels. Many postsecondary institutions also recruited Fulbright scholars from various parts of the Arab world. Additional initiatives included the federally funded Language Flagship program, which enrolls students in critical languages such as Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, Korean, and Russian. The
availability of funding may have prompted some young Americans to take Arabic language classes and many colleges and universities to start new Arabic language programs. Nugent and Slater (2016) reported that the undergraduate Flagship enrollments saw a large increase from 41 in 2006 to 967 in 2014.

However, these initiatives were not sufficient to address the issues affecting interest in Arabic teaching as a profession. Belnap (2007) addressed several of these issues, including low pay, lack of job security, and absence of recognition of language study as an academic discipline. For these reasons, findings revealed that some teachers would not recommend teaching as a career for their students. Similarly, Abdalla and Al-Batal (2011) conducted a survey of 209 Arabic teachers in the United States. This survey identified lack of professional development opportunities for in-service higher education teachers, despite initiatives such as STARTALK, as one of the issues affecting TAFL. Additionally, the authors showed that most of the teachers surveyed did not have formal training in language pedagogy as graduate students. This finding was confirmed in two studies (Oulbeid, 2018, 2021) that looked at non-native teachers of Arabic in the United States and correlated with similar findings from Wang (2009) and VanPatten (2015) regarding a dearth of postsecondary language teacher training. Given these findings, it is paramount that Arabic language teacher preparation and recruitment start earlier, in postsecondary or even secondary education. As stated in the previous section, our target-language versions of the Educators Rising 2.0 recruitment modules begin to address this issue.

Our research questions (RQs) for this study were as follows:

1. How did instructors implement the Arabic-language teacher recruitment modules?
2. What do postsecondary students of Arabic know and believe about the possibilities of becoming world language educators?
3. How did these beliefs and knowledge change after implementation of teacher recruitment modules in Arabic?

**Context and Methods**

**Materials and Participants**

During the summer of 2020, a group of eight Arabic instructors translated and adapted ACTFL’s Educators Rising 2.0 modules into Arabic to address the benefits of learning and teaching the language through activities in the target language. The resulting modules are appropriate for intermediate-level speakers of Arabic but can also be scaffolded for novice learners. Table 1 outlines the themes addressed in each module and Figure 1 shows a sample slide from Module 1.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Title and Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Get inspired; program overview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Why learn and teach world languages?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Language teachers as agents of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Join the conversation! Exploring interpersonal communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The stories we tell: Exploring interpretive communication through written texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Writer’s workshop: Exploring presentational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1
 Themes addressed in Arabic version of Educators Rising
Two postsecondary Arabic instructors, Mariam and Layla, agreed to participate in this study and were recruited from the group that designed the Arabic modules. They were selected due to their willingness to participate as well as their extensive involvement in designing the modules; both instructors had been closely involved in the translation and adaptation of each module, whereas most of the other instructors had taken more ancillary roles.

Mariam earned a doctoral degree in education with a focus on bilingual education from a higher education institution in the United States. She taught Arabic for over two decades at the postsecondary level and in Arabic summer programs. At the time of the study, she taught Arabic courses at two small liberal arts
Back and Oulbeid

67

colleges in the Northeast and was one of two Arabic lecturers in these institutions. Mariam noted that her students generally take Arabic because they are specializing in international relations or are pursuing majors in fields as varied as engineering, neuroscience, religion, and history. Because some jobs require more than one language, her students see taking an additional language as leading to more career opportunities.

Layla has a master’s degree in comparative literature from a university in Egypt. At the time of the study, she was a doctoral candidate in literary criticism at a different Egyptian university. She served as an adjunct professor of Arabic at two urban colleges and one community college in the United States and implemented the modules in one of the urban colleges. Most of Layla’s students in this college were pursuing majors in translation or criminal justice. The program has a strong focus on social justice and activism; student interests generally lie in non-education fields where they could use their language, specifically government agencies (e.g., translating for the police or the CIA). Students in Layla’s classes came from diverse backgrounds, with many heritage speakers of varieties of Arabic and/or refugees.

Because the target-language version of Educators Rising 2.0 can be used either as a cohesive whole or as stand-alone modules, we allowed each instructor to pilot the modules in which they were most interested. Layla opted to pilot modules 1, 3, and 5, and Mariam piloted modules 2, 4, and 5 (see Table 1 for themes). Both instructors had worked on the modules they piloted and felt invested in introducing these modules to students for the first time. Layla piloted her modules in her Arabic 1 (novice level) course; Mariam piloted her modules in two Arabic Level 3 (intermediate level) courses. Students were primarily sophomores and juniors, with a few seniors and freshmen in Layla’s course.

After the modules had been implemented, we sent an email to Layla and Mariam’s students asking them if they would be willing to participate in a focus group discussion. From this email, four students responded positively, and two students attended the focus group discussion, one from each instructor’s class. At the time of the study, Peter was in Mariam’s Arabic 3 class and Adhira was in Layla’s Arabic 1 class. Peter was a 21-year-old junior; in addition to Arabic, he spoke Spanish and English and had taken Chinese language classes. Born in South America, Peter self-identified as Latino. Peter was majoring in music but enjoyed studying linguistics and computer science. He became interested in Arabic through an acquaintance who was a Fulbright scholar. Peter was fascinated by the Arabic script and wanted to learn how to read it.

Adhira was 23 years old and self-identified as Asian/Pacific Islander/Asian American. At the time of the study, she was a senior majoring in computer science and minoring in cybersecurity. Adhira spoke Bengali, English, Hindi, Korean, and Spanish in addition to Arabic. Adhira was interested in learning Arabic because of the opportunities the language provides when connecting with others and understanding their cultures.

Procedures

We first conducted a pre-intervention survey with all students from Layla and Mariam’s Arabic courses to assess initial knowledge about and interest in WL teaching as a career. Surveys were conducted online using Qualtrics software and contained multiple-choice questions on student interest in pursuing careers in WL education and the reasons why they might (or might not) be interested in such a career (see Appendix A for survey questions). There were 39 total respondents for the pre-intervention survey; eight students from Mariam’s classes and 31 from Layla’s class. After the intervention, the same survey was re-administered to both groups. There was attrition in responses for the post-intervention survey, particularly from Layla’s institution, with 18 total respondents (six from Mariam’s classes and 12 from Layla’s class).

The two instructors implemented their chosen modules over the fall semester of 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, modules were implemented completely online. Although both instructors were encouraged to integrate these modules into their course curriculum, they chose to use them as stand-alone modules outside of normal coursework. Students were asked to independently complete the modules and the surveys; in some cases, they received extra credit for this work.

After completion of the modules, we interviewed the instructors and two focal students to gain a deeper understanding of the modules’ implementation and what students had taken away from them. Interviews
for both groups were semi-structured in nature, with a brief list of guiding questions (see Appendices B and C) that led respondents into a more detailed exploration of the topics. Interviews with both instructors and focal students lasted 30-45 minutes each and were conducted over Zoom and recorded. Focal students were sent a follow-up questionnaire after their interviews and instructors were contacted via email with any follow-up questions.

**Analysis**

We chose a sequential, mixed-methods approach for this study to increase its validity and trustworthiness through analysis (triangulation) across several data points (Flick, 2004). For RQ1 (How did instructors implement the Arabic-language teacher recruitment modules?), we undertook a thematic analysis of transcribed interview data and course artifacts. We used inductive methods grounded in these responses, with a commitment to highlighting participants’ own voices. Our analytical process involved iterative readings of the interview transcriptions and weekly discussions between the authors, as well as open and focused coding of these data and analytic memo writing on pertinent themes. For RQ2 (What do postsecondary students of Arabic know and believe about the possibilities of becoming world language educators?), we first analyzed responses to the pre-intervention survey data, which allowed us to have a general overview of student interest (or lack thereof) in WL education and their reasons for these choices. We then undertook a thematic analysis like that used for RQ1 of transcribed interview data from the instructors and focal students. We examined instances where themes converged between instructors and students, as well as important contradictions. For RQ3 (How did these beliefs and knowledge change after implementation of teacher recruitment modules in Arabic?), we used similar methods, in addition to analyzing descriptive statistics from the post-intervention survey data. We also performed a one-tailed t-test on the pre- and post- responses to survey question #4 (Are you currently interested in becoming a K–12 or college world (foreign) language teacher?) to determine if there was a significant change in responses. Our mixed-methods approach allowed our qualitative data to expand upon the quantitative results by providing additional depth, detail, and context to the survey responses.

We present our findings in the following section first by outlining how the instructors implemented the recruitment modules and then proceeding to student beliefs and knowledge about WL instruction and whether or not these changed after the modules’ implementation.

**Findings**

**RQ1: How Did Instructors Implement the Arabic Language Teacher Recruitment Modules?**

An analysis of module-related assignments given during the course highlights the different tools and linguistic scaffolds each instructor used. Because Layla taught a novice-level class, she used both English and Arabic for content, instructions, and prompts; as a result, her students were allowed to respond in either language. Mariam also used both languages for writing prompts related to the modules; however, her students were expected to respond in Arabic for all assignments. Both Layla and Mariam helped scaffold student responses through the use of engaging online tools such as Jamboard, Padlet, and Storyboard. Figure 2 shows an example of an assignment from each class, with student responses in Arabic and English.
Another important component of Layla and Mariam’s implementation of the modules was their mutual emphasis on culture in their overall curriculum. This topic came up several times in our interviews with both instructors. Mariam positioned culture as an essential component of WL teaching: “As long [as] you come to study a language you cannot just study the synthetic aspect […] it’s very difficult to understand language without understanding culture.” For Layla, cultural information included correcting stereotypes about Arabic speakers: “I always noticed that American students lack the main information about the Middle East. They even are very confused [about] what is Middle Eastern and what is Arabic and what is Persian and what is Indian […]” Mariam was also committed to correcting stereotypes by using assignments that highlighted cultural comparisons. This emphasis on placing WL instruction in a cultural context influenced which modules the instructors chose to implement; for example, both Layla and Mariam implemented Module 5, “The Stories We Tell,” which called attention to literary figures as reflecting the many cultural products and perspectives in the Arabic-speaking world.

A crucial decision the instructors made during the implementation of the modules was whether they would integrate them into their existing curriculum or present them in isolation outside of the course content. Although neither instructor opted to integrate the modules into their curriculum, each took a different approach with respect to encouraging students to complete the module. Layla chose to give extra credit to students who completed the three modules. As she explained, this was due to what she perceived as a need to offer additional incentives:

I don’t know if you feel that in your institutions but there's a kind of lack of commitment […] so from the first minute that [Author] told who would implement the modules, I was thinking of offering extra credit because they wouldn’t do it without any kind of encouragement.
Thus, given that Layla perceived her students as lacking “commitment” or additional motivation to complete the modules on their own, she offered extra credit. Additionally, Layla found it important to pilot modules that she perceived as relevant to her students’ interests: “I chose the most interesting modules for my students who are studying social justice […] the majors there [at the college] are between social justice and social activism.” Layla piloted Module 3, which outlines how language teachers can be agents of change and includes a mini-lesson on Middle Eastern refugees. She also piloted Module 5, using the story of the Arabic feminist writer May Ziade as an example of a known author.

In contrast, Mariam presented the modules as isolated lessons without offering any extra credit, stating, “It was just volunteer work from their side.” Nor did Mariam mention her students needing any incentive to complete the modules, which Layla had emphasized several times during her interview. Although neither instructor integrated the modules into their planned curriculum, they did use existing curricular content and their overall course objectives both to deepen the modules’ content and as justification for how they decided to implement the modules. For example, Layla used her course discussion board to blend the contents of Module 5 with some of her existing materials on Arab women’s empowerment. Mariam felt that the module topics corresponded well with certain elements of the curriculum. For example, referring to her decision to implement Module 4, “Let’s Talk!,” she explained: “Some of the topics […] we talk about, like being shy to speak the language […] So this is also part of my class curriculum, to help a student improve in the language.”

As seen in Mariam’s statement, the similarity between the modules and her own curricular goals also served to justify her decision to not award extra credit for completing the modules. Despite these accommodations, both instructors had to remind their students to finish the modules. Layla said she sent repeated reminders, even though there was an extra credit incentive for the students. Mariam said that she reminded students only once, and that her students “responded really well” to the reminder. However, neither instructor perceived that these reminders signaled a lack of interest on the part of the students; both instructors said that the students took the modules seriously and writing samples from the module prompts showed thoughtful responses from all student volunteers.

Finally, department flexibility was a key component in implementing the modules. Mariam easily obtained department approval for piloting the modules, whereas Layla had one supportive department and one non-supportive department. She stated, “at [one of the colleges], my chairperson and the coordinator of the language program didn’t sign the approval for me. He told me I had to finish, what do you call it? The IRB?” This resistance seemed due to a misunderstanding about IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval, which was obtained for the project prior to soliciting instructor participation. Perhaps the chairperson Layla alluded to thought that she was the investigator of the study and therefore needed to go through the IRB process at her own institution. Whatever the case, this extra roadblock prohibited Layla from implementing the modules at her second institution and emphasizes the importance of departmental support in implementing curriculum revisions, such as these recruitment materials.

Knowledge and Beliefs About World Language Education (Survey Data)

To respond to RQs 2 and 3 (What do postsecondary students of Arabic know and believe about the possibilities of becoming WL educators? and How did these beliefs and knowledge change after implementation of Arabic teacher recruitment modules?), we first examined responses to survey question 4, which directly asked about interest in becoming a WL teacher. Responses indicate that, both prior to and after the intervention, most students were not interested in this career (see Figures 3 and 4).
Figure 3
Responses to Question 4: Pre-intervention

Figure 4
Responses to Question 4: Post-intervention
A one-tailed *t*-test performed on these responses yielded no significance, indicating that the intervention of the modules had no effect on changing student desires to become world language teachers (*t* = 0.000571, *p* = .49979). Responses to subsequent questions indicate that, although in the post-intervention group both interest and lack of interest in WL teaching were well represented, the percentage of respondents who responded negatively declined in the post-intervention survey. As seen in Figures 2 and 3, the negative responses “definitely not” or “probably not” represented 76% of responses in the pre-intervention survey and 55% in the post-intervention survey, a majority in both cases, but a drop nevertheless. This suggests that those who did respond to the post-intervention survey may have self-selected as already being interested in pursuing a career as a world language instructor.

Furthermore, question 9 in the post-intervention survey specifically asked whether participant views had changed since the last time they had completed the survey. Three of the respondents indicated that yes, their views had changed, and 14 respondents said their views had not changed (one respondent indicated that they had not taken the pre-intervention survey). However, when participants were asked what helped to change their minds, all three indicated “conversations with peers,” rather than the modules themselves. This response, combined with the lack of statistical significance and participant attrition that seemed to skew towards more positive responses, further indicates that there was no effect of the modules. We discuss possible reasons for this in the following section.

When examining the reasons why respondents were not interested in a career as a WL teacher (RQ1), as well as whether those reasons changed post-intervention (RQ2), we analyzed responses to question 5 as seen in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

### Figure 5

**Responses to Question 5: Pre-intervention**

![Diagram showing reasons for not being interested in a career as a WL teacher](image)

*Note. Respondents were instructed to select any answer that applied, which explains the figures’ percentages totaling over 100.*
The main response to question 5 in both the pre- and post-intervention surveys was that respondents had no interest in teaching overall. Although the number of respondents who indicated this reason declined from the first to the second survey, survey attrition and self-selection may account for these results, as described previously. We note that the category “interest in teaching another subject,” which had three responses in the pre-intervention survey, did not receive a response in the second survey, and the number of respondents who believed that teachers were not paid enough increased from one to four. Preoccupation with language skills remained steady in both surveys, paralleling findings by Back and Dean (2020). “Other” responses included, “I’m not focusing on being a teacher (especially K–12), but if the need arises, I’d pursue it;” “I am interested in working for the criminal justice system;” “I have a different career choice set;” and “I don’t think I will get a job as a language teacher.” One “other” response, “I don’t think I’m interested in K–12 teaching, but I am interested in becoming a WL teacher,” indicated a possible misreading of or lack of clarity on question 4, which was “Are you currently interested in becoming a K–12 or college world (foreign) language teacher?” (our emphasis).

When indicating what might change their mind about the possibility of becoming a WL teacher, Figures 7 and 8 show an increase in alternative responses in the post-intervention surveys.
Figure 7
Responses to Question 6: Pre-intervention

In these responses, we see that the category “nothing (would change my mind)” declined from 16 to 4 respondents. The category identifying a need to improve language skills was similar percentage-wise across both surveys, whereas the category “if I had more information about language teaching careers” declined in raw numbers but increased in overall percentage. These responses suggest that post-intervention survey respondents seemed more amenable to considering a career in WL teaching if they were able to improve their language skills or learn more about this career. However, we must again note that attrition and self-selection may have played a role in these changes.

In sum, our survey results indicate a majority lack of interest in becoming a WL teacher in both the pre- and post-intervention surveys, with no significance found between the pre- and post-survey results.
Moreover, participant attrition and the possibility of self-selection may account for some of the movement to more positive orientations toward the profession, as well as a willingness to receive additional information. Although we cannot assume that the modules had any effect on participant interest (and explain some of the reasons for this below), analysis of interview data from the instructors and students allowed us to draw a more detailed picture of some student and teacher perceptions of these modules. The responses from the teachers and focal participants, taken together with the findings from RQ1, offer some possible reasons for the modules’ non-effect, as well as a slightly more hopeful outlook on recruitment efforts.

Knowledge and Beliefs About World Language Education (Interview Data)

The overall lack of interest in becoming language teachers, as demonstrated in the survey data, was reinforced by the instructors in our interviews. Layla stated that when she asked the students outright about their interest, “Most of the answers were ‘no.’” She attributed this to the college where she taught, which emphasizes careers in criminal justice, “not in education fields.” Mariam also implied that her students’ response was mostly negative, but added “I think they’d like to, but still at this stage they are not sure what they want to major or minor in. So, it may take them time.” Thus, the instructors perceived their students as either having predetermined career choices that did not include teaching, or being unsure of their career paths.

The focal students’ beliefs about the possibility of becoming WL educators stemmed from their life experiences (Peter), the desire to spread knowledge, and connection with other linguistic and cultural communities (Adhira). Unlike most survey respondents, Peter did not exclude teaching as a future career and mentioned that his father was a teacher. When asked about his beliefs about teaching, Peter responded that it was an opportunity to become acquainted with students. As for becoming a teacher, he noted: “Teaching in high school would be pretty cool. Teaching is super cool. You get to meet a lot of people and students […] So, that is always an option.”

Reflecting on the impact of participation in the modules, Peter noted that the experience raised his consciousness about showing respect for teaching and considering teaching as a career option. In the follow-up questionnaire, he wrote:

    I’ve learned to think more critically about the languages I do know and how I might explain linguistic concepts to new learners (like adjective order in English). Realizing that there’s so much about language that us natives take for granted gives me so much more respect and awe for language teaching as a profession.

As Peter alluded to the intricate aspects of language teaching, he referred to teaching as “no small feat.” Still, he acknowledged that the modules helped him think about teaching a language; if not Arabic, he would perhaps teach English in an Arabic-speaking country where he could use the language frequently.

Like Peter, Adhira viewed language teaching positively and referred to it as a passion, but with considerably more emphasis on the cultural aspects of language learning. For Adhira, teaching entailed the ability to help students make better connections with others across social and cultural contexts. Prior to her work with the modules, one of her main expectations about teaching languages was that the teacher should be either a native speaker or highly proficient. Another impression was that language teaching should not be limited to teaching the language forms; rather, language and culture need to be taught in tandem. This attitude shows how Adhira was influenced by her Arabic teacher, who she referred to as “very passionate” and who teaches both language and culture. For Adhira, learning both language and culture would facilitate connections between people: “You feel more comfortable speaking to that person sharing information. Yeah, and when I am learning a language, I am not just learning the language, I am also learning about the culture.” As for planning for teaching a WL as a profession, Adhira said that she would like to teach only a language with which she is “comfortable,” such as Bengali, her native language. Reflecting on her participation in the modules, she described how the experience provoked her thoughts about whether she would like to teach or not:
I’ve been thinking about [teaching] because after doing the survey and the research, I did question myself. So, I was like “Do I want to? Do I see myself?” I was like “Yeah! Maybe, why not?” […] The language that I learned and how I used it in my life, I think, would be interesting to teach.

Thus, although Adhira’s multilingual background made her open to the possibility of teaching, she appeared concerned about proficiency and the level of comfort in a language needed to lead a WL classroom.

The instructors felt that their students would not necessarily choose teaching as a career, but the focal students reflected upon their multiple life experiences as they considered teaching as a potential profession. Moreover, both Peter and Adhira noted participation in the modules as instrumental in raising their consciousness about the affordances and challenges of teaching Arabic, and languages in general.

Both the survey and interview findings show a general lack of interest among the students in language teaching as a career; however, data collected from interviews with the instructors and the two focal students point to the importance of instructor context and student background and history in the eventual success of teacher recruitment initiatives in Arabic language classrooms. We address these issues in the following section.

**Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations**

The findings from this exploratory study on student beliefs and knowledge of WL education indicated that most participants were not interested in becoming a WL teacher, mostly due to a lack of interest in teaching in general (RQ2). Other reasons, such as concerns about language proficiency and salary, paralleled previous research by Back and Dean (2020) and Kissau et al. (2019). These beliefs did not change after implementation of the recruitment modules, indicating no effect from this implementation (RQ3). There are several possible reasons for this finding, many of which have to do with instructional contexts and how the modules were implemented (RQ1). First, Layla’s Arabic classes were taught in the context of a program focused on criminal justice; therefore, most of the students in the program had already chosen their career path. Mariam’s students, who were enrolled in a small liberal arts college, might have been more amenable to the possibility of becoming language teachers. We also note that these program contexts dictated the modules selected, which, due to their introductory content, contained limited information to dispel the preconceptions or concerns about teaching that have been found in previous studies (e.g., Back & Dean, 2020; Kissau et al., 2019; Swanson & Mason, 2018).

Second, although the modules were designed to be integrated into existing coursework, neither instructor opted to use them as such, unlike Back and Dean (2020), who found a positive effect from teachers integrating a prior version of the modules into their curriculum. Even though both instructors used existing curricular materials to augment the modules, they were presented as stand-alone assignments to be completed either on a volunteer basis or for extra credit. Several students completed the modules; however, the teachers’ decision brings up the issue of self-selection bias, whereupon only students who were already interested in teaching may have opted to complete the modules. Although this might be less likely in the case of an extra credit assignment, it would be more likely if the modules were completed on a volunteer basis. The goal of creating target language teacher recruitment materials such as these is precisely so that instructors can incorporate them into their coursework and in this way reach a wider audience of potential recruits, and it was our hope that these instructors would do this.

We also recognize the agency of teachers participating in a study, yet the study’s schedule limited both the number of modules they chose to implement and how they implemented them. We are encouraged that the instructors found overlaps between the modules’ content and their existing curriculum, as discussed in the findings section on RQ1. As this was an exploratory study, we encourage future studies to work more closely with instructors on integrating these modules into their existing curriculum. For example, we would recommend that this work take place before the start of the academic year, so that instructors have time to adjust their curriculum; instructors volunteered for this pilot study over winter break, which was perhaps not enough time to fully process the materials. We also recommend that recruitment-oriented materials be
low-stakes assignments, as graded assignments in languages such as Arabic can be particularly anxiety-provoking for learners.

Departmental and, particularly, administrative flexibility is key to allowing these types of adjustments to take place. One of Layla’s department heads allowed her to implement the project, but another one did not. Issues of reluctance could be alleviated by increased communication with WL department heads and school administrators about the importance of advocating for WLs through recruitment of quality instructors, as urged by Stein-Smith (2021) and Long (2000). Given that many WL programs are being cut around the United States at both the K–12 and postsecondary levels, positioning these modules as one tool to preserve existing programs, particularly for LCTLs such as Arabic, would be an effective strategy.

Furthermore, to effectively position these modules as program preservation tools, some additional clarification was necessary regarding the modules’ purpose. Layla accurately stated the doubts that she and Mariam had regarding this issue:

I think that was kind of confusing for my colleagues who were working with me. We couldn’t understand maybe until we reached the end of the project […] Are we working to recruit like graduate students who are interested in working as teachers? Or are we implementing modules to engage the students, or to encourage them to work on something new in the workplace, like being a teacher?

Given that our response to Layla’s questions is “all of the above,” we recommend that brief introductory materials, perhaps in the form of an orientation video, be added to the Educators Rising 2.0 recruitment modules so that instructors and administrators can more clearly understand their purpose. This aligns with Mariam’s own suggestion: “I would do a video at the beginning explaining why [we are] doing this module and the importance […] It will help the teachers.” We do note that an introductory video was sent to the students in both Layla and Mariam’s classes, but this was sent apart from the modules and may not have been shown to administrators.

Finally, we wish to highlight the findings from our interviews that pointed to the role of culture and emphasize the importance of culture in retaining learners and recruiting teachers of Arabic (Ryding, 2013, 2018). Layla frequently addressed stereotypes of Arabic speakers in her classroom and incorporated culturally relevant materials for her heritage speaker and refugee students, whereas Mariam discussed cultural topics such as family relations from a comparative/intercultural perspective. We strongly feel that the continued integration of culture into an Arabic language curriculum is essential to challenge stereotypes about Arabic speakers and go beyond structural approaches to the language, in this way making the language relevant and language learning engaging for heritage and non-heritage speakers alike. Additionally, integrating cultural products, practices, and perspectives as one whole in teaching would enable learners to appreciate the uniqueness and value of various cultures and to reflect upon their own. This approach will undoubtedly encourage more learners of Arabic to consider a career in WL teaching. Related to this is the recruitment of both heritage and non-heritage teachers of Arabic, so that non-heritage learners such as Adhira, who had concerns about her own Arabic proficiency, might have diverse models of proficient instructors.

Conclusion

The ongoing WL teacher shortage and decline in WL enrollments calls for an increased effort to recruit qualified teachers, particularly in the case of critical LCTLs such as Arabic. This exploratory study examined student beliefs and instructional contexts through the implementation of language teacher recruitment modules in Arabic. Findings indicated no effect of the modules, although focal students appeared to develop greater awareness and appreciation of the profession. Instructor implementation of the modules may have led to their not reaching a wider variety of students, particularly those who were not interested in conducting extra work outside of class. Future studies on WL teacher recruitment, Educators Rising 2.0, and the target language versions of these modules should cast a wider net, involving more
participants and creating additional tools for instructors and administrators to both emphasize the importance of teacher recruitment and assist instructors with integrating recruitment efforts, such as these modules, into their existing curriculum.

References


Welles, E. B. (2004). Foreign language enrollments in United States institutions of higher education, Fall


**About the Authors**

**Michele Back** is Associate Professor of World Languages Education at the University of Connecticut. Her research interests include language teacher recruitment, development, and professionalization; the intersections of race and discourse; and the role of translinguaging and multilingual ecology in transforming schools and other communities of practice.

**E-mail:** michele.back@uconn.edu

**Brahim Oulbeid** (PhD, University of Massachusetts - Amherst) is a lecturer in French and Arabic at Mount Holyoke College and Westfield State University. His research interests include second language pedagogy, the teaching and learning of Arabic as a foreign language, and identity development among teachers of Arabic.

**E-mail:** boulbeid@mtholyoke.edu