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Claire Mei Li Thong

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***I Heart Arabic:*  
Online “Working Procrastination” Resources  
for Arabic Language Learners**

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*I Heart Arabic:*  
**Online “Working Procrastination” Resources  
for Arabic Language Learners**

**by**

**Claire Mei Li Thong, B.A.; M.A**

**Report**

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## **Abstract**

### ***I Heart Arabic:* Online “Working Procrastination” Resources for Arabic Language Learners**

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Reaching proficiency in Arabic requires a lengthy commitment, and as a result, it is important that students have access to resources that will help them maintain their motivation to learn. Many students are motivated to study because they want to experience the culture of Arabic-speaking countries; however, although the situation is improving, cultural awareness in Arabic language curricula at the elementary level has traditionally been overshadowed. While there are an abundance of online resources available for languages such as Spanish and Japanese that have a consistently strong focus on culture, there are very few comparable online resources for introductory-level Arabic language learners.

To address this gap in the resources available to Arabic language learners, I created a website and accompanying social media system called *I Heart Arabic*. It is directed at introductory students of Arabic and aims to promote cultural awareness, introduce multiple forms of colloquial Arabic, and challenge negative stereotypes of the

Arab world. In short, it provides what I have termed “working procrastination” to students of Arabic. “Working procrastination” acts as a break from the rigors of studying Arabic grammar and vocabulary. By focusing on Arab culture in a light-hearted manner, *I Heart Arabic* can re-motivate students of Arabic language, allowing them to return to their daily studies refreshed and re-energized.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Reaching proficiency in Arabic requires a lengthy commitment, and as a result, it is important that students have access to resources that will help them maintain their motivation to learn. Many students are motivated to study because they want to experience the culture of Arabic-speaking countries; however, although the situation is improving, cultural awareness in Arabic language curricula at the elementary level has traditionally been overshadowed. While there are an abundance of online resources available for languages such as Spanish and Japanese that have a consistently strong focus on culture, there are very few comparable online resources for introductory-level Arabic language learners.

To address this gap in the resources available to Arabic language learners, I created a website and accompanying social media system called *I Heart Arabic*. It is directed at introductory students of Arabic and aims to promote cultural awareness, introduce multiple forms of colloquial Arabic, and challenge negative stereotypes of the Arab world. In short, it provides what I have termed “working procrastination” to students of Arabic. “Working procrastination” acts as a break from the rigors of studying Arabic grammar and vocabulary. By focusing on Arab culture in a light-hearted manner, *I Heart Arabic* can re-motivate students of Arabic language, allowing them to return to their daily studies refreshed and re-energized.

All of the content that I have created for *I Heart Arabic*, whether animations, articles, or memes, is inspired by my time in Jordan and my experience learning Arabic. I hope the personal tone of my narratives invites the viewer to reflect upon their own experiences as well.

## Chapter 2: Why learning Arabic is challenging

Arabic is a diglossic language, which means that it manifests two ways: as the highly codified Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) that is used in literary and formal situations, and as the colloquial Arabic that is used in ordinary conversations.<sup>1</sup> An analogy in English would be if we spoke in most situations the way we do now, but if all media and literature employed Shakespearean English. The diglossic nature of Arabic is problematic for language learners because, at a basic level, there is more to learn – there are double sets of vocabulary items and different rules and sounds.<sup>2</sup> Although many programs are now addressing this issue, in the recent past it was possible for students of Arabic who had studied MSA for two or three years (but no colloquial Arabic), to travel to an Arab country and find that they were unable to communicate naturally in day-to-day life.<sup>3</sup> Although these numbers have been contested and obviously depend on a variety of factors, it is interesting to note that the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) estimates that it will take their students of Arabic 2200 hours of class time, with the second year in-country, to reach ‘general professional proficiency.’ In contrast, they estimate that it will only take 575-600 hours to reach the same level of proficiency in a language such as Spanish.<sup>4</sup> Even if we were to halve the FSI’s estimate for Arabic, it would still be nearly double the amount of time that it takes to reach proficiency in Spanish.

Reaching proficiency in any language takes dedication and commitment and it is inevitable that students will experience periods in which they lack motivation. As learning Arabic seems to be a lengthier process than learning most European languages, students may have even more periods in which they lack motivation. Extensive research

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Batal (1992), p. 284

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Thompson (2014).

within Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has found that motivation and attitude are important factors in determining the level of proficiency achieved by language learners.<sup>5</sup> The direction of causality is unclear—whether successful learning increases motivation, or motivation results in successful learning—but what is clear is that motivation plays a vital role.<sup>6</sup> Therefore it is important to consider what motivates students of Arabic to continue learning. Significantly, a study into the motivations of 120 students enrolled in first-and second-year Arabic classes found that 90% were motivated to study Arabic because they wanted to interact with other speakers of Arabic and travel to Arab countries.<sup>7</sup>

Given students' reasons for learning Arabic, it seems natural to expect that Arabic language curricula would emphasize both colloquial Arabic and cultural awareness. Yet that is not the case. As Mahmoud Al-Batal, Professor of Arabic at the University of Texas at Austin, argues, cultural awareness in Arabic-language curricula has been marginalized and overshadowed by the attention given to grammatical competence, particularly at the elementary level.<sup>8</sup> In a survey of nearly 50 percent of college Arabic teachers in the United States, instructional materials were rated as teachers' most pressing need, particularly listening, cultural, and reading materials.<sup>9</sup> The same survey also found that despite changing attitudes the incorporation of colloquial Arabic remains limited during the first two years of study.<sup>10</sup>

Current online resources also reflect this bias. There are many excellent online resources for learning grammar and practicing listening skills, including the Defense

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<sup>5</sup> Ellis (1992), p.118.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p.119.

<sup>7</sup> Husseinali (2006), p. 407.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Batal (1988), p. 444.

<sup>9</sup> Abdalla and Al-Batal (2011-12), p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* p. 16.

Language Institute’s website, the YouTube channel “Learn Arabic with Maha,” and the blog “The Arabic Student.” But they require the language learner’s full attention and active participation. There are hardly any blogs or websites that consistently focus on Arab culture that adopt a relaxed, less didactic ethos, even though such resources abound for languages such as Spanish and Japanese. The lack of entertaining resources related to colloquial Arabic and Arab culture is a particular problem for beginners, who cannot yet engage with television shows, novels, and articles produced for native speakers.

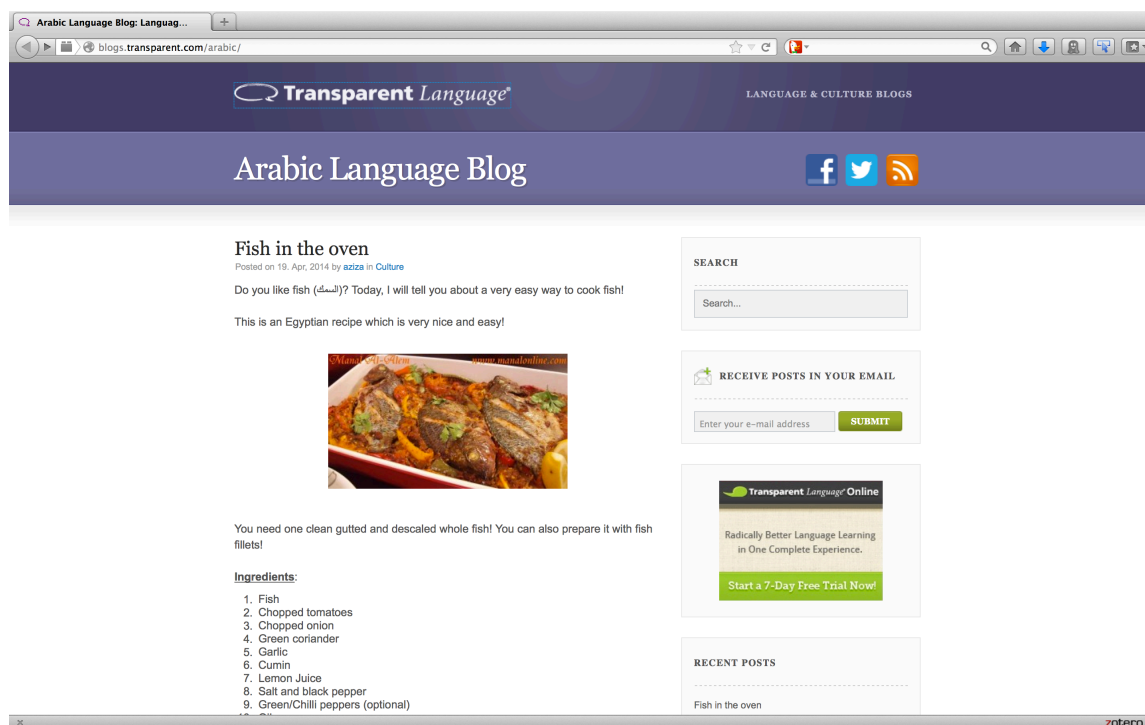


Figure 1: The Arabic language blog for Transparent Language.<sup>11</sup>

Arabic language blogs tend to be part of a larger website and their articles about culture, although informative, can often seem impersonal. In general the typography and imagery found on Arabic language blogs is staid, and graphically they fail to convey the excitement of learning a language and exploring a different culture.

<sup>11</sup>“Arabic Language Blog” (2014).



Figure 2: Tofugu, a Japanese language and culture blog.<sup>12</sup>

Japanese language blogs tend to be standalone blogs and to provide insights into the culture from a learner's perspective. In general, they are also more visually appealing, and Tofugu is an excellent example of this. Its use of bold imagery and typography give it a fresh, contemporary, and vibrant feel.

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<sup>12</sup> Tofugu (2014).

### Chapter 3: The *I Heart Arabic* solution

My response to this lack of materials has been to design a system of interrelated online resources (a website and collection of social media accounts) called *I Heart Arabic*.<sup>13</sup> It complements formal language instruction by providing light-hearted information about Arab culture and colloquial Arabic. In other words, it provides what I call “working procrastination”: a break that is thematically related to a primary task (such as learning vocabulary), but is sufficiently removed and light-hearted enough to provide inspiration, and thus allow students to return to their primary task refreshed and re-energized.

There is a considerable amount of evidence pointing to the effectiveness of taking short breaks. For instance, the results of a study published in 2011, which were consistent with previous reports, indicated that even brief and relatively infrequent breaks from a primary task can help to maintain a heightened level of vigilance for a prolonged period of time.<sup>14</sup> *I Heart Arabic*'s “working procrastination” provides short, sharp bursts of cultural and colloquial language information and is therefore ideally placed to act as this kind of brief mental break for Arabic language learners, allowing them to learn about Arab culture, and at the same time possibly improve their concentration on their primary task of learning Arabic.

Rather than a structured curriculum, *I Heart Arabic* provides a series of light-hearted commentaries to which students can turn when they need a quick and entertaining ‘pick-me-up’.

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<sup>13</sup> I Heart Arabic (2014).

<sup>14</sup> Ariga and Lleras (2011), p. 442-443.

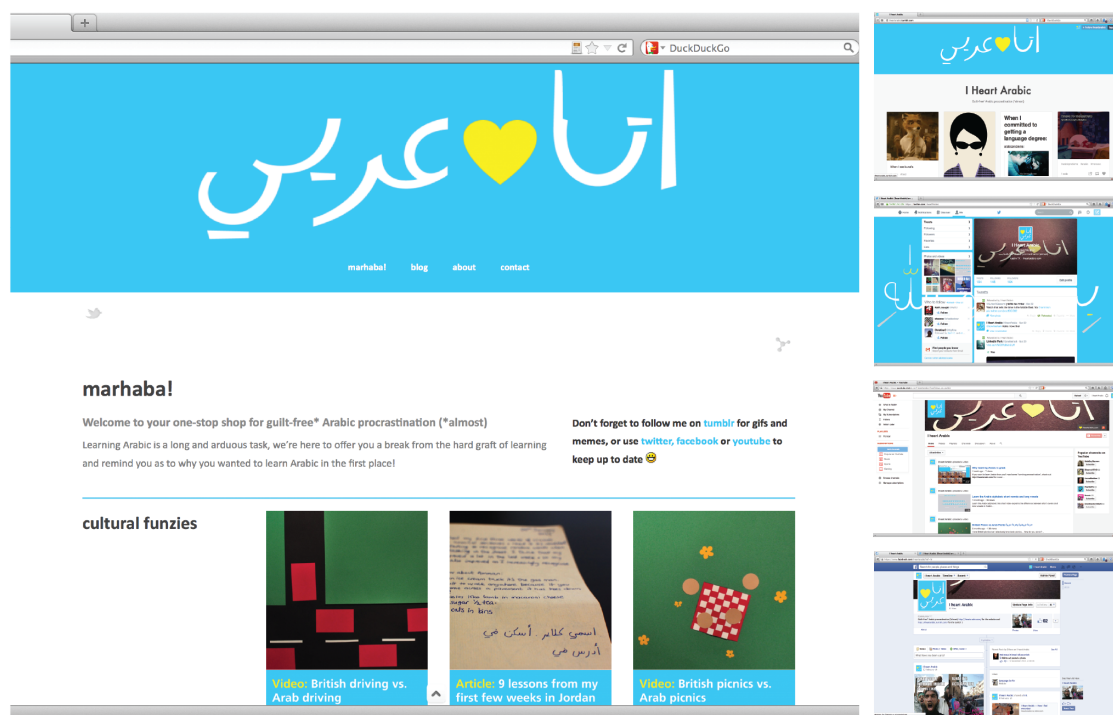


Figure 3: The website (large picture) and four social media arms of *I Heart Arabic* (top to bottom: Tumblr; Twitter; YouTube; and Facebook)

The site’s light-hearted, humorous tone and colourful aesthetic are central to its ethos and work on two levels; firstly to signal that this is “working procrastination” and a break from normal studies; and secondly, to offer an alternative to the prevailing narrow and negative discourse on Arabic, Islam, and the Middle East. This prevailing discourse revolves around simplistic and negative stereotypes, in which Muslims are constructed as a threat and as fanatics who are determined to bring about the demise of the West.<sup>15</sup> *I Heart Arabic’s* status as “working procrastination,” its focus on culture, and its light-hearted nature contribute to an alternative discourse on the Arab world by revealing the diversity of life in the Middle East, using a tone and color palette that is not commonly associated with that area of the world.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Said *On Orientalism* (1998).

## A STRUCTURAL OVERVIEW

*I Heart Arabic* is a system of interrelated online resources, centred around its website with four social media accounts working as smaller, quicker and more flexible forms of outreach and aggregation. The YouTube and Facebook pages aggregate the work and act as a subscription service, notifying *I Heart Arabic's* followers when there are new posts or videos. In contrast, Tumblr and Twitter are forms of social media that allow rapid sharing of concise messages, and that encourage reblogging and retweeting from other sources. Twitter and Tumblr thus serve primarily as additional sources of content for the website, whereas Facebook and YouTube have more reciprocal relationships to it.

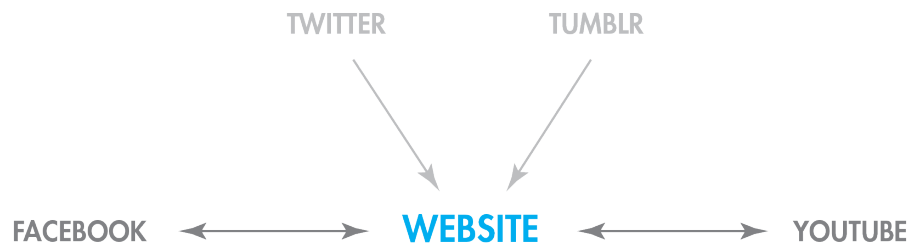


Figure 4: The *I Heart Arabic* system



Although there are potentially many ways to provide introductory students of Arabic with “working procrastination,” I decided that my work should be available online and disseminated through a variety of social media: the advantage of this method is that these media are free and used across the world. All four social media sites (YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr) are excellent for outreach as they allow ready access to existing networks and can reach wide audiences. For instance, as of March 2014 the *I Heart Arabic* Facebook group has 62 members, but the last post reached an audience of 198, because when viewers share, like, or comment on a post, it then appears on the newsfeeds of people in their network, therefore allowing the content to spread organically.

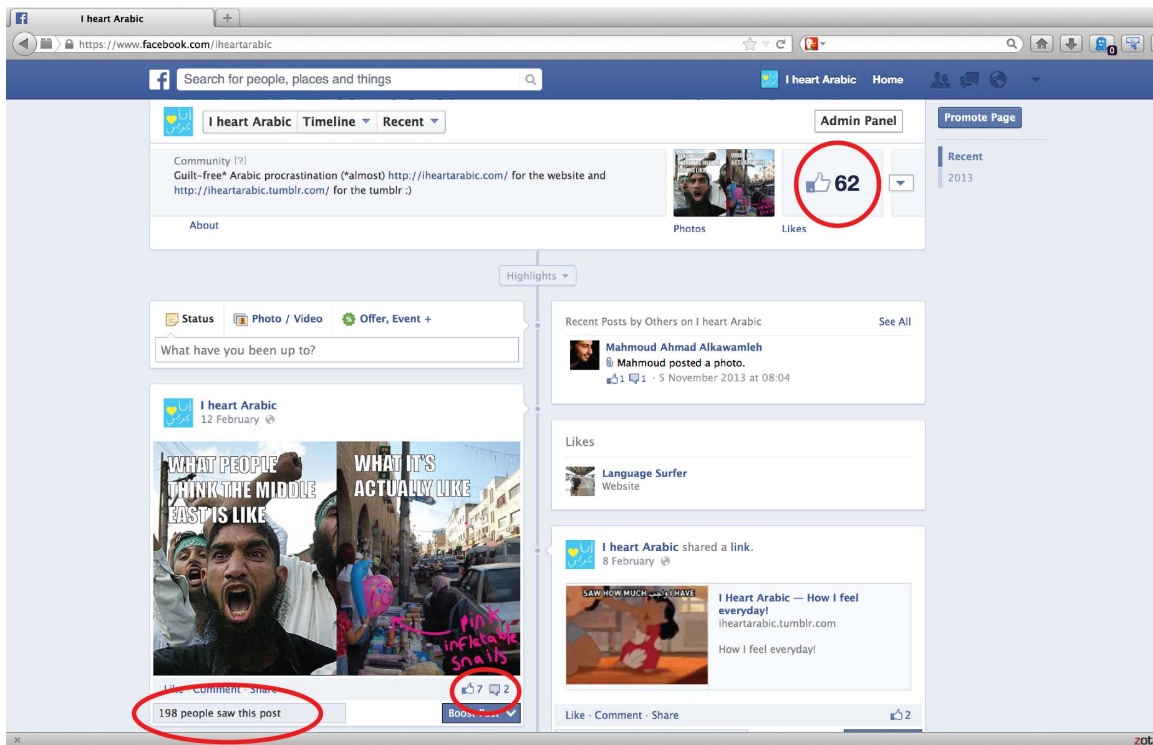


Figure 5: Tapping into networks: the *I Heart Arabic* Facebook group

## CONTENT: VIDEOS

An Arabic language student's normal homework activities are frequently text based and revolve around vocabulary, grammar, and writing practice.<sup>16</sup> In deliberate contrast, the centrepiece of *I Heart Arabic* is its video content. I chose video as my primary medium because it is a more accessible and informal medium that easily lends itself to the idea of a break and “working procrastination.” *I Heart Arabic* features two types of animations; the first type focuses on culture and the second on providing appropriate colloquial vocabulary for various day-to-day situations, such as picnics. The videos are very short stop-motion animations that use abstracted, colourful forms to offer a broad snapshot of Arab culture with a splash of colloquial Arabic.

The “cultural” animations are light-hearted, twenty-second comparisons that compare a situation or behaviour as it manifests differently in British and Arab cultures. Even though it is time intensive to create, I chose stop motion because I believe that its playful connotations (reminiscent of, for example, *Sesame Street* animated shorts or the *Wallace and Gromit* films) evokes a receptive frame of mind in viewers and helps them connect with the content. The overall colourful aesthetic re-emphasizes that this is “working procrastination,” and the abstracted forms enable the audience to empathize without being distracted by preconceived notions of Arabic and Arabs. Humor is also an important thread throughout the content of *I Heart Arabic*, and particularly in these animations. It is used not only to capture the viewer's attention, but also to build an emotional connection between the student and the language that will help them engage with Arab culture.

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<sup>16</sup> Abdalla and Al-Batal (2011-12), p. 15.

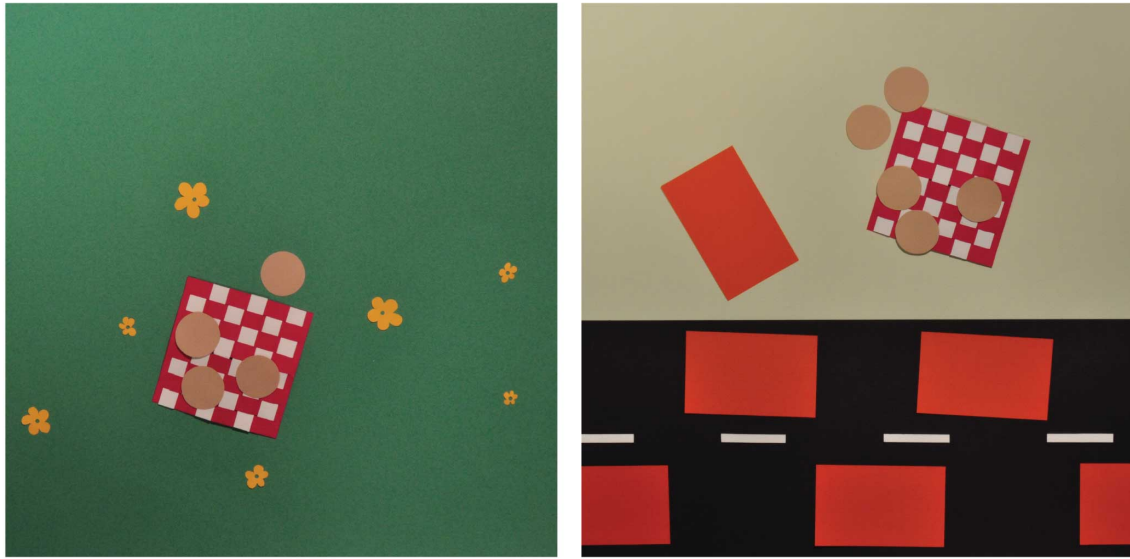


Figure 6: Stills from the animation ‘British picnics vs. Arab picnics.’  
On the left is a British picnic in a park, and on the right is an Arab picnic by the side of the road. This animation was based on my observations of how people typically picnic in Jordan.

My aim with these videos is to invite viewers to reflect upon their own culture and their perception of other cultures. It is true that Arab culture is very diverse, both across and within national borders, but this broad overview suits beginning levels as an introduction, and is a starting point from which it is possible to expand and specify.<sup>17</sup> In order to stimulate discussion, the comments on these YouTube videos are left open, and the animations end by asking how the viewer drives, picnics, or bargains. In addition, a short article accompanies each video on the website (and also appears underneath the video itself in the “about” section on YouTube), explaining in more detail the ideas behind the animations and encouraging viewers to reflect on this specific cultural situation. For instance, the article accompanying the above picnic video starts with the tagline ‘I like British picnics but I love Arab picnics’ and goes on to explain that British

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<sup>17</sup> Al-Batal (1988), p. 447.

picnics generally involve preparing and cooking all of your food beforehand which is then dragged around in a quest to find the “perfect” spot, only for it to start raining the instant you sit down. Whereas in my opinion, Arab picnics, (inspired by my observations in Jordan and from talking to Arabs from other countries) are more practical, as they often park next to where they picnic (in the countryside but by the side of the highway). Barbequeing in the countryside means that they can spend less time preparing to go on the picnic and more time enjoying the experience.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 7: Encouraging discussion at the end of the picnic vocabulary animation

In contrast to the “cultural” videos, the “vocabulary” videos take as a point of departure a situation from one of the cultural animations (for example, the one on picnics) and create a short dialogue with relevant vocabulary in colloquial Arabic. They

<sup>18</sup> *British Picnic vs. Arab Picnic* (2013).

are aimed at elementary level students and are only one minute long in order to retain their “working procrastination” ethos.

Their style was partly inspired by Pimsleur<sup>19</sup>, an audio language learning program that uses spaced repetition to help students build up their vocabulary; however, there are key differences. Instead of being purely audio-based like Pimsleur, these animations include visual elements to act as handrails. There are closed captions, which are highlighted to help the viewer follow the dialogue; and clips from the previous animation are used to break it up into sections, giving the viewer time to absorb the information.

In addition, the animations use a simple repetitive structure in a question-and-answer format to focus on specific elements of vocabulary. For instance, the images below show stills from the last section of the picnic vocabulary animation, and can be translated into English as:

- Pick up the chicken, it’s cooked.
- It’s cooked?
- Yes, it’s cooked!

This particular section seeks to emphasize the word ‘istewa’ (which means cooked) by repeating it three times in an Iraqi dialect. It is also emphasized visually by being enlarged and placed in the middle of the screen the second time that it is mentioned.

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<sup>19</sup> Dr. Paul Pimsleur was an applied linguistics scholar and developed an audio-based language acquisition program for modern Greek in 1963 to test his theory of self-instruction. Pimsleur only became available to consumers in 1980, four years after his death, and has since expanded to over 50 languages.

“About Us: The Pimsleur Language Programs,” Simon & Schuster, Inc, accessed April 20, 2014

<http://www.pimsleur.com/about-pimsleur-language-programs>



Figure 8: Series of stills from the picnic vocabulary animation. The hyphen in the close-up of 'istewa' allows different parts of the word to be highlighted to help the viewer hear and understand the pronunciation of the word.

This vocabulary animation focuses on the Iraqi dialect due to resources that were available at the time. I hope to expand it to have multiple versions in different dialects where the conversion would change to reflect the typical picnic in that area or country.

The dialogue in the vocabulary animation is relatively simple in order for those at the elementary level to understand it, and be able to pick up some new pieces of vocabulary easily thanks to the repetitive structure. In line with *I Heart Arabic's* “working procrastination” ethos, the videos aren’t meant to feel like a listening exercise; rather, they are intended to provide an opportunity for students to put their knowledge into practice and learn a few new words of colloquial Arabic.

CONTENT: MEMES

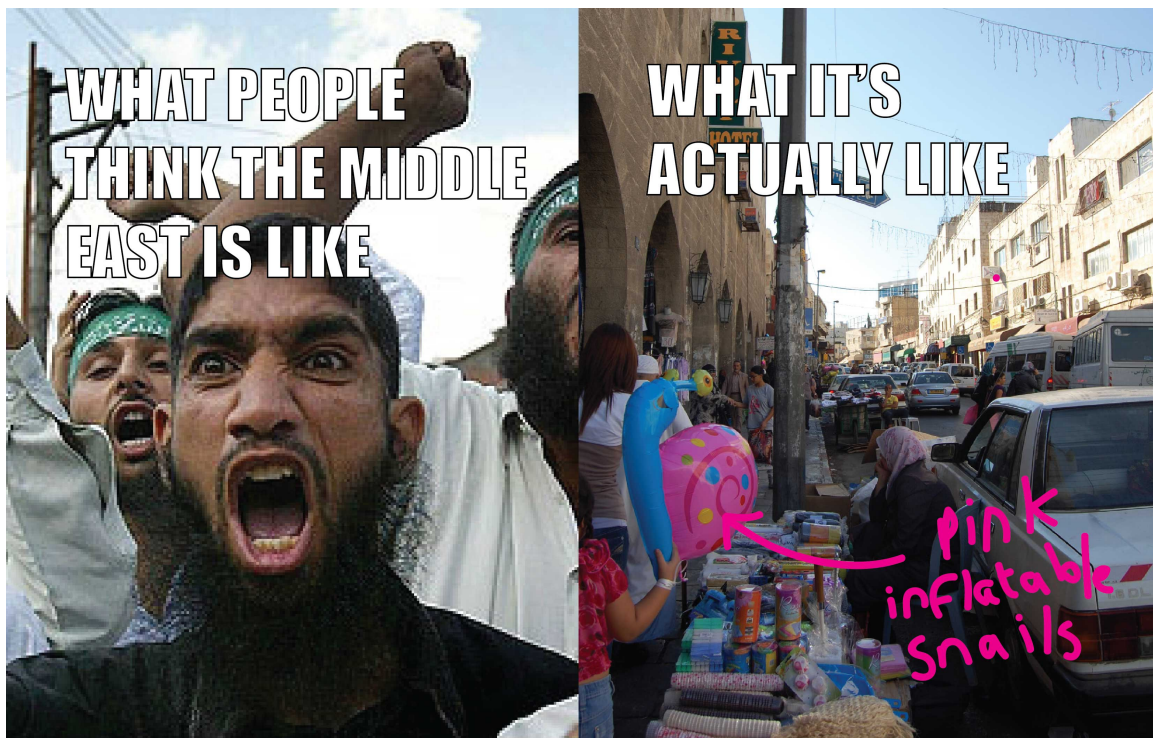


Figure 9: Challenging perspectives meme. The Middle East is usually presented in the media as a one-dimensional place where angry fanatics live. The picture on the right seeks counter this by showing daily life. The inflatable pink snail, in its color and form, is the antithesis of the common stereotypes that are applied to the Middle East.

Creating stop-motion animations is a time intensive process, so I felt it was important to create supporting content in a form that was faster to make and distribute. I chose internet memes (both stills and gifs) because they're a popular medium that encourages participation and can be rapidly shared. They're also frequently used for ridicule and political commentary, as when a whole new genre of memes arose in response to Mitt Romney's 'binders full of women' gaffe. The memes that I have created range from the serious to the mundane: some tackle misconceptions of Arabs, whereas some complain about the common woes of Arabic language learners. They aim to strike a



chord with different kinds of viewers, and to encourage sharing, which in turn helps *Heart Arabic* reach a wider audience.

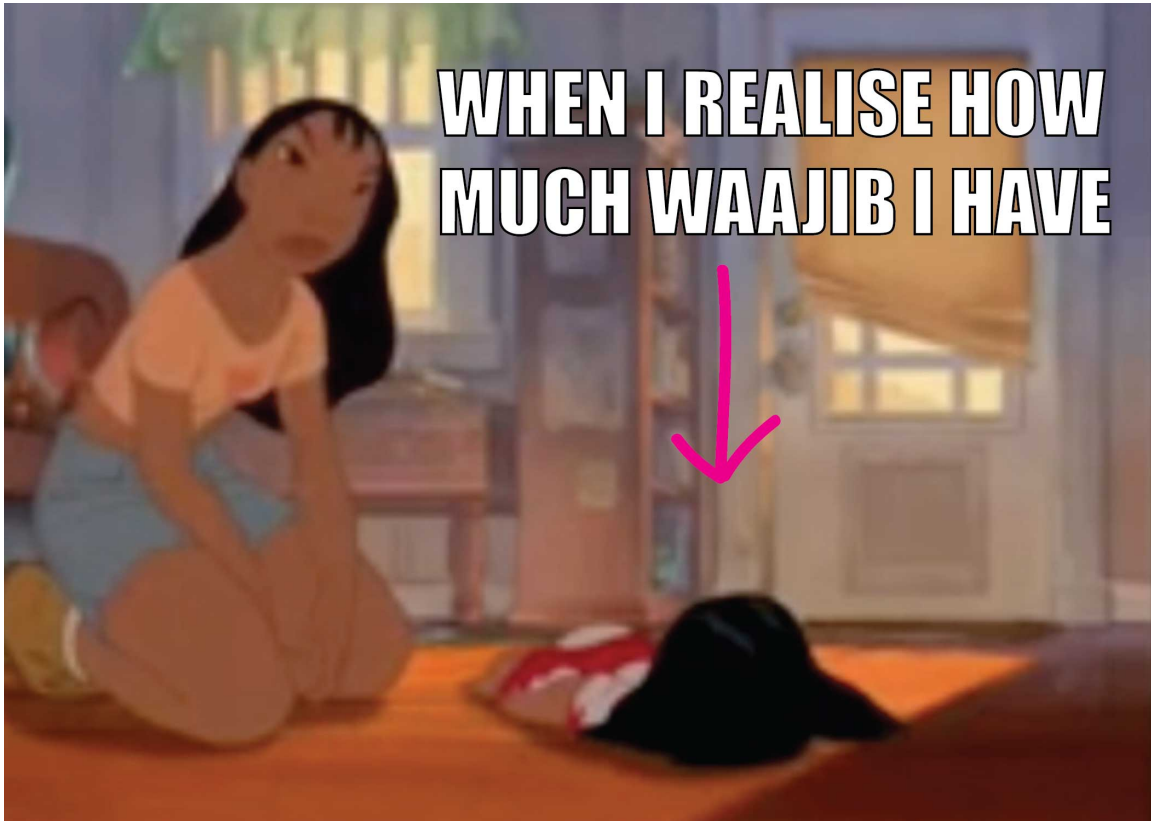


Figure 10: Waajib (homework) meme: A common feeling among Arabic language students is that we have a high workload! Although this workload is necessary in order to progress and make effective use of class time, occasionally it can become a little overwhelming. I believe that it's important for students to know that everyone feels like this from time to time, and that it doesn't make you abnormal or a bad student.



## Chapter 4: Conclusion

I see my work as straddling the fields of instructional design and critical design. Overall the project of *I Heart Arabic* seeks to educate viewers about Arabic language and culture, which situates it in the realm of instructional design. However, aspects of it, such as the challenging perspectives meme and the picnic comparison animation, also function as forms of critical design. These aspects seek to disrupt the prevailing negative discourse surrounding Arabic, Islam, and the Arab world and widen this narrow perception by showing the diversity and humanity of life in the region, and offering an alternative, positive view that is not frequently seen within mainstream media.<sup>20</sup> And significantly, rather than being accessible only to gallery-goers or readers of academic journals, my critique is free, available to anyone with an internet connection, and accessible in large part because of the everyday media I use. My work takes advantage of the internet generation's strong engagement with and use of the web and social media to insert a critique into their everyday online experience. By using these common, everyday, accessible media, I hope that my work and my ideas will reach a wider audience than is normally possible with academic media.

*I Heart Arabic* both identifies and aims to address a gap in the resources available to Arabic language learners. It is not intended to be *the* comprehensive resource for learning Arabic, nor to revolutionize the way in which students learn Arabic. Rather, it is meant to serve as a complement to formal Arabic language instruction, providing light-hearted information about Arab culture and colloquial Arabic. By providing “working procrastination,” *I Heart Arabic* can serve as a re-energizing break for students, providing them with the boost of motivation that they need to continue learning.

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<sup>20</sup> Edward Said *On Orientalism* (1998).

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