

Political Blogs As An Educational Tool In Learning Arabic: Opportunities And Challenges

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of political blogs as instructional resources in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers, situating the analysis within communicative and critical literacy approaches to language learning. It explores both the pedagogical opportunities these blogs offer for developing advanced language skills and the linguistic, cultural, and ideological challenges associated with their integration into the classroom. Adopting a mixed-methods research design, the study combines quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive evaluation of this emerging pedagogical practice. Data were collected through a content analysis of a purposive sample of thirty (30) Arabic political blogs representing diverse ideological orientations and regional contexts. In addition, an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were administered to one hundred and twenty (120) intermediate- and advanced-level learners of Arabic from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To measure learning outcomes, pre- and post-tests were conducted with a subgroup of forty (40) learners who engaged with political blogs as supplementary instructional materials over twelve weeks. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques via SPSS. In contrast, qualitative data were examined through thematic coding and critical discourse analysis to identify salient linguistic, stylistic, and discursive features. The findings reveal statistically significant gains in learners' acquisition of specialized political vocabulary, reading comprehension, and academic writing skills, alongside increased political and cultural awareness. However, the study also highlights persistent challenges, including the complexity of political discourse, ideological bias, and the diglossic gap between Modern Standard Arabic and colloquial varieties. The study concludes that the pedagogically guided integration of political blogs—supported by careful content selection, scaffolded tasks, and explicit training in critical discourse analysis—can effectively enhance advanced Arabic language learning while mitigating potential linguistic and ideological constraints.

Keywords: Arabic Language Learning; Political Blogs; Digital Pedagogy; Authentic Materials; Media Literacy; Language Acquisition

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, digital media has undergone rapid expansion, opening innovative avenues for education and language learning. Among these developments, blogs have emerged as a distinctive medium of communication and an efficient channel

for disseminating information and fostering dialogue. Political blogs, as a specialized genre within this medium, represent a particularly relevant yet underexplored educational resource with considerable potential for advanced language instruction. Despite their growing influence in public discourse, their systematic pedagogical value for teaching Arabic to non-native speakers remains insufficiently examined through empirical research. This study addresses this gap by investigating the effectiveness of political blogs as instructional resources for enhancing Arabic language proficiency. In an era increasingly shaped by digital technologies, the internet has become a primary platform for accessing political information, ideological debate, and contemporary discourse. Political blogs, which encompass a wide range of ideological orientations and regional perspectives, offer learners sustained exposure to Modern Standard Arabic in authentic and contextually rich communicative settings. Beyond functioning as sources of information, these blogs actively shape public debate and facilitate participatory culture, thereby positioning themselves at the intersection of language, politics, and civic engagement (Shirky, 2008; Papacharissi, 2015). From a pedagogical standpoint, this authenticity provides a valuable context for examining how learners engage with complex texts, specialized vocabulary, and argumentative discourse in real-world language use.

Achieving advanced proficiency in Arabic requires engagement with linguistically and culturally embedded texts that reflect actual communicative practices. While traditional textbooks remain foundational, they often provide limited exposure to contemporary political discourse and specialized registers. Political blogs, by contrast, offer learners access to extended texts characterized by formal syntax, rhetorical strategies, and domain-specific terminology. Such features make them particularly suitable for investigating their impact on learners' vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and academic writing skills—dimensions that are systematically examined in this study through a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures (Castells, 2010; Pariser, 2011). At the same time, the integration of political blogs into Arabic language instruction presents significant challenges that warrant careful analysis. Political discourse is frequently marked by dense terminology, abstract concepts, metaphorical expressions, and a formal register, which may impede comprehension for non-native learners. Moreover, the ideological positioning of blog authors introduces potential bias, requiring learners to distinguish between factual information and opinionated interpretation (Habermas, 1989). These challenges underscore the necessity of examining not only learning outcomes, but also learners' perceptions, difficulties, and critical engagement strategies—elements that are explicitly addressed through learner surveys, interviews, and discourse analysis in the present study (Allen & Paul, 2020; Mayer, 2021).

Positioned at the intersection of digital media studies, applied linguistics, and Arabic language pedagogy, this study adopts a mixed-methods research design to achieve two interrelated objectives. First, it empirically examines the extent to which political blogs contribute to measurable improvements in learners' Arabic language proficiency, particularly in terms of specialized vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and writing development. Second, it systematically investigates the linguistic, ideological, and pedagogical challenges learners encounter when engaging with political blog content. By triangulating data from content analysis, learner questionnaires, interviews, and pre- and post-testing, the study aims to provide evidence-based insights into both the

educational potential and the limitations of political blogs, and to propose pedagogically grounded strategies for their effective integration into Arabic language curricula.

The research draws on the works of Castells (2010) and Shirky (2008), which elucidate the capacity of new media to organize discourse beyond traditional institutional frameworks. It also incorporates Habermas's (1989) concept of the *public sphere* and the role of media in shaping public debate, alongside Papacharissi's (2015) framework of *affective publics*, which offers valuable insight into discourse formation in digital environments. In addition, the Uses and Gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) provides a useful lens for analyzing learners' motivations for engaging with political blog content.

Educational research consistently emphasizes the importance of exposing language learners to authentic texts drawn from real-world contexts (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Political blogs represent a particularly suitable form of authentic material, as they present living language that reflects contemporary issues and current public discourse. This perspective aligns with calls from scholars in Arabic pedagogy, such as Alhawary (2018) and Alosch (2019), to move beyond exclusive reliance on traditional textbooks and to incorporate contemporary media into Arabic language instruction. The study builds on existing research that examines both the challenges and opportunities associated with technology-enhanced Arabic language teaching, including the works of Al-Abdullah (2018) and Khalid (2019). Furthermore, the phenomenon of diglossia and the pedagogical challenges it poses for learners, as discussed by scholars such as Albirini (2016), provides an essential theoretical backdrop for understanding a key linguistic issue addressed in the present study. The research is also informed by critical literacy scholarship (Mayer, 2021; Allen & Paul, 2020; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022), which emphasizes the necessity of developing learners' abilities to evaluate information sources critically and to distinguish factual reporting from opinion and ideological positioning. Such competencies are particularly vital when learners engage with politically oriented blog content.

Despite these valuable contributions, a clear gap remains in studies that specifically examine the methodological potential and challenges of employing Arabic political blogs as authentic texts in Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) classrooms, while also proposing a practical pedagogical framework for their integration. This study seeks to address this gap through a systematic analysis that synthesizes relevant theoretical perspectives with applied pedagogical considerations.

This study addresses the central problem of the disconnect between traditional Arabic language teaching curricula and the necessity of exposing learners to authentic, contemporary linguistic content. Although political blogs represent a rich source of modern Arabic language and cultural-political discourse, their systematic use as an educational tool remains limited and underexplored. Furthermore, there is a lack of a clear framework to guide instructors and learners on how to utilize these blogs to enhance linguistic competence while navigating accompanying challenges such as linguistic complexity, political bias, and difficulty in accessing reliable sources. This research aims to examine the effectiveness of political blogs as instructional resources in enhancing Arabic language acquisition among non-native learners, to assess the extent to which political blogs contribute to the development of learners' vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing skills, and cultural awareness. Also to identify and analyze the linguistic, cultural, and technological challenges encountered by non-native learners when engaging with political blogs for educational purposes, and to propose an evidence-

based pedagogical framework and practical instructional strategies for the effective integration of political blogs into Arabic language curricula.

METHOD

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive, triangulated analysis of political blogs as pedagogical tools in Arabic language education. A convergent design was selected to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data in parallel, with the intent of merging the results during the interpretation phase to develop a holistic understanding of the research problem.

A purposive sample of thirty (30) active Arabic-language political blogs was selected for content analysis. The selection criteria were designed to maximize diversity and representativeness: ideological spectrum: blogs were categorized as reformist/liberal, Islamist, nationalist, or independent. Blogs originated from the Levant, the Gulf, North Africa, and the diaspora. Blogs were required to have published at least one post per month over the preceding six months and to focus primarily on Arab-world politics. Blogs hosted on independent domains or major platforms (e.g., Blogger, WordPress) were included.

Participants included 120 learners of Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL), recruited from university language programs and online learning communities. Participants were classified as intermediate or advanced, based on institutional placement, completion of at least two years of university-level Arabic, or self-assessment aligning with ACTFL Intermediate Mid or higher. All were non-native speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds, including English, French, German, and Chinese. From this pool, a volunteer sub-group (n = 40) participated in a 12-week intervention and pre-/post-testing. All participants provided informed consent, and the study protocol received approval from the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Content Analysis Codebook; a structured codebook, based on prior literature, was developed to analyze the blog texts. Key analytical categories included: lexical features: Frequency and type of specialized political terminology, and discursive features: rhetorical moves (e.g., argumentation, persuasion), narrative structures, and intertextuality. Linguistic Register: Use of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA), or dialectal inclusions. Thematic Content: Primary political topics and evident ideological framing.

25-item questionnaire, including Likert-scale and multiple-choice items, was administered via Qualtrics. It collected data on: learners' prior experience with digital media in language learning, perceived benefits and difficulties of using political blogs, and self-reported changes in vocabulary, reading confidence, and cultural knowledge. A subset of 20 questionnaire respondents participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews (30–45 minutes each, conducted via Zoom). The interview guide contained eight open-ended questions exploring: motivation and engagement, strategies for negotiating perceived challenges, critical engagement with ideological bias, and suggested pedagogical supports. To assess specific language gains, a 50-point test was developed and validated by two experienced AFL instructors, consisting of: vocabulary section (25 points): target words were drawn from the sampled blogs, assessing receptive knowledge through multiple-choice definitions. Reading comprehension section (25 points): two unseen political blog excerpts, similar in style and complexity to the study

corpus, followed by questions assessing comprehension of main ideas, inference, and rhetorical intent.

The experimental sub-group ($n = 40$) engaged in a structured 12-week intervention alongside their regular Arabic coursework; frequency: participants read and analyzed two prescribed blog posts per week. Task structure: weekly tasks were scaffolded, including: glossing specialized vocabulary, summarizing main arguments, identifying persuasive techniques, writing short reflective responses or participating in guided online forums. Instructor support: a dedicated instructor provided weekly feedback. Control group: a matched control group ($n = 40$) continued with standard curriculum activities without the blog-based intervention.

Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) in SPSS. To evaluate the intervention's impact, pre- and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups were compared using a mixed-design ANOVA. Qualitative analysis; interview transcripts and open-ended questionnaire responses were analyzed inductively using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Content analysis of blogs combined deductive coding based on the codebook with inductive analysis to identify salient linguistic and discursive patterns. Trustworthiness was ensured through peer debriefing and the maintenance of an analytical audit trail. By employing a convergent mixed-methods design, this study triangulates evidence from multiple sources, including content analysis of political blogs, learner questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and pre-/post-test assessments. This methodological integration ensures that both the measurable linguistic outcomes and the nuanced qualitative experiences of learners are captured comprehensively. The systematic alignment between research objectives, questions, and instruments allows for a robust interpretation of results, providing clear insights into the educational potential of political blogs, the specific language skills they enhance, and the challenges learners encounter. The following section presents the findings derived from this integrated approach, highlighting both the quantitative improvements in vocabulary, reading, and writing skills, and the qualitative patterns relating to learner perceptions, critical engagement, and navigated challenges.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the findings from the mixed-methods analysis, structured according to data source to clearly differentiate between quantitative measures of impact and qualitative insights into the learner experience.

Measuring Impact and Perceptions

Statistical analyses of test scores and questionnaire responses provided measurable evidence regarding the impact of political blogs and learner perceptions.

1. Language Development Gains

A paired-samples *t*-test conducted on the pre- and post-test scores of the intervention group ($n = 40$) revealed a statistically significant improvement in overall performance. The mean score increased from 32.5 ($SD = 6.1$) in the pre-test to 41.8 ($SD = 5.7$) in the post-test, $t(39) = 7.24, p < .001$. This improvement was particularly notable in the specialized vocabulary subsection, where scores rose from a mean of 14.2 ($SD = 4.1$) to 19.1 ($SD = 3.9$), $t(39) = 5.86, p < .001$.

2. Learner Perceptions from the Questionnaire

Data from the full sample (N = 120) indicated that learners valued the use of political blogs while acknowledging their challenges:

88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that blogs exposed them to *essential vocabulary not found in textbooks*. 82% reported that regular engagement with blogs improved their ability to follow complex written arguments. 75% rated the initial difficulty of comprehending an entire blog post as “*high*” or “*very high*,” highlighting the challenge inherent in authentic materials.

3. Thematic Insights and Textual Features

Analysis of interview transcripts and blog content added depth and context to the quantitative findings, revealing core themes and textual characteristics.

Learner Experience: Thematic Analysis

Three central themes emerged from the interviews (n = 20):

1. From Linguistic Decoding to Critical Engagement: Learners reported a progression from focusing primarily on vocabulary to analyzing author perspective. Participant 9 noted: *At first, I was just looking up every third word. Now, I find myself asking, Why did the writer choose this specific metaphor to describe the protest?*
2. Motivation through Authenticity and Challenge: Real-world relevance served as a key motivator. Participant 14 explained: *Understanding a blog post about sanctions felt more urgent than completing a textbook exercise. The difficulty was part of its value.*
3. The Scaffolding Imperative: Learners emphasized that unguided use was overwhelming. Participant 3 remarked: *The guided analysis template was crucial. Without it to structure my reading, I would have missed the underlying arguments.*

Content Analysis: Linguistic and Discursive Features

A systematic examination of the 30-blog corpus confirmed their dual role as rich and demanding resources:

1. Lexical Density & Specialization: Blogs contained an average of 18–22 field-specific terms (e.g., *political empowerment*, *sectarian power-sharing*, *consociational democracy*) per 800-word post.
2. Rhetorical and Discursive Complexity: Persuasive techniques were pervasive; 70% of blogs employed historical analogy, and 65% included emotionally laden metaphors (e.g., describing a political process as “*a farcical play*”).
3. Register Variation and Diglossia: While core texts were written in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), interactive sections (comments) provided a live laboratory of diglossia, featuring frequent code-mixing and dialectal Arabic, exposing learners to the continuum of Arabic language use.

The convergent analysis reveals a cohesive narrative:

Quantitatively, learners achieved significant gains in vocabulary and reading comprehension. Qualitatively, they described a journey of engagement with authentic, complex discourse, heavily dependent on structured pedagogical support. Content analysis highlighted both the sources of richness (specialized lexicon, cultural references) and the sources of challenge (rhetorical complexity, ideological framing). Together, these findings confirm that political blogs constitute a potent pedagogical resource, whose effective integration into Arabic language curricula is non-trivial and necessitates deliberate instructional design and scaffolding. The data collectively affirm the core

premise that political blogs are a potent yet demanding authentic resource, whose pedagogical value is unlocked through a deliberate, theory-informed approach.

Transforming Measured Challenges into Strategic Learning Objectives

The findings demonstrate that the primary challenges identified are not insurmountable obstacles but rather constitute the raw material for advanced learning. The significant post-test gains in specialized vocabulary ($t(39) = 5.86, p < .001$), occurring alongside learners' reports of high initial difficulty (75%), indicate that the linguistic complexity inherent in political discourse can be leveraged to drive explicit instruction in advanced lexicon and discourse analysis. Furthermore, the interview theme of "*Developing a Critical Stance*," in which learners described comparing biased narratives, directly operationalizes the theoretical imperative of critical literacy (Allen & Paul, 2020; Mayer, 2021). The pervasive presence of persuasive metaphors and framing in 65–70% of the sampled blogs provides a concrete textual basis for training learners in source evaluation, thereby transforming the challenge of ideological bias into the core objective of fostering critical digital literacy.

Blogs as a Living Laboratory for Diglossia Awareness

Content analysis revealed a clear linguistic duality: formal Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in main posts juxtaposed with dialectal and middle-register Arabic in comment sections. This observed variation transforms the theoretical issue of diglossia (Albirini, 2016) from an abstract challenge into a tangible teaching moment. Rather than shielding learners from this reality, instructors can consciously leverage blogs to raise metalinguistic awareness, situating different language varieties within authentic functional contexts. This approach helps learners perceive MSA and colloquial varieties as part of a communicative continuum rather than as disconnected systems.

The Non-Negotiable Role of Structured Pedagogical Scaffolding

The qualitative data overwhelmingly underscored that learner success depended on systematic support. The interview theme "*The Scaffolding Imperative*," with unanimous emphasis on guided templates, validates pedagogical principles derived from literature on authentic materials (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Quantitative improvements in the intervention group, contrasted with the lack of significant gains in the control group, provide empirical support for this claim. Effective integration therefore requires instructors to curate content, design sequenced tasks (e.g., from glossary creation to comparative rhetorical analysis), and provide a framework that transforms unstructured exposure into focused learning—a finding that directly informs the proposed practical pedagogical framework.

Validating Situated Learning and Affective Engagement

Learners' strong motivation, reported in both questionnaires (82% noting improved engagement) and interviews, was attributed to the "*authenticity and challenge*" of real-world issues. This provides robust empirical support for Situated Learning theory, as blogs effectively function as a bridge to the "*real world*," embedding language acquisition within meaningful socio-political contexts. Moreover, this aligns with Papacharissi's (2015) concept of "*affective publics*," where discourse is emotionally charged. Engagement with affectively potent material enhances

relevance and learner investment, addressing motivational factors (Dörnyei, 2009) that are critical for sustained language learning at advanced levels.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that political blogs constitute a rich educational resource with significant potential to support Arabic language acquisition for non-native speakers. They provide authentic, contemporary language input, enhance specialized vocabulary and analytical skills, and offer an indispensable window into the cultural and political context of the Arab world. However, realizing this potential requires moving beyond mere exposure to a mindful and structured pedagogical integration that directly addresses the inherent challenges of linguistic complexity, diglossia, and ideological bias. Based on the findings, the following practical steps are recommended for educators and curriculum designers:

1. Develop a Curated Repository: Institutions should create a vetted and annotated collection of Arabic political blogs, categorized by topic, linguistic difficulty, and ideological perspective, to facilitate instructor selection.
2. Integrate Structured Task Design: Blog-based activities must be scaffolded progressively, beginning with guided lexical and syntactic analysis, advancing to rhetorical and discursive evaluation, and culminating in comparative critical assessment of multiple sources on the same issue.
3. Embed Critical Literacy Training: Instruction should explicitly teach the deconstruction of persuasive language, source evaluation, and recognition of narrative framing, enabling learners to treat ideological bias as a learning opportunity rather than a barrier.
4. Create Support Materials: Instructors should provide companion resources for key blogs, such as glossaries of high-frequency political terms, guides to rhetorical devices in Arabic political discourse, and structured discussion frameworks.

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