



My Arabic journey did not really start until my first year at American University when I signed up for my first Arabic class. I knew that Arabic would offer me unique opportunities and it would bring me closer to a part of the world that I didn't understand very well.

Let me take a step back and explain how I found Arabic – by that point I had studied French, Spanish, and some Latin in addition to keeping up my home languages of Urdu and Punjabi while learning English in school.

When I was 6 years old, my family moved to the United States from Pakistan. I started kindergarten without understanding a word of English in a school where there were no other children that looked like me, nor anyone who spoke either of my home languages. I was separated into an ESL (English as a second language) class for part of the day with one other student, who spoke Spanish at home. I was in ESL for about a year, and continued to grow my vocabulary and learn about the American culture for the next few years in school, through TV, books, and from other children my age who lived in the neighborhood.

Fast forward to 6th grade, where I was selected for a pilot Latin class with a few other students. The school decided not to offer Latin, but instead gave us the option of taking French or Spanish. I decided on French and took that for many years before realizing how beneficial Spanish would be, considering the number of Spanish speakers in the US. I met with my academic advisor and convinced them to let me add Spanish to my schedule – *porque no los dos?*

Taking both classes reminded me of learning English in kindergarten, except this time my peers were at the same starting point as me. Studying two different yet similar languages was challenging; I confused grammar rules and vocabulary almost daily in both classes. Whenever I used Spanish in French class or vice versa, I could take comfort in knowing that at least I knew the word in the other language!

Learning languages opened my mind to learning about different cultures. I realized that no matter which language class I was in, I was excited that I would be able to communicate with people from different backgrounds. While learning about other cultures, I was also reflecting on my own experiences and identities: some choices were my own - like the choice to add French to my schedule - and some were out of my control - like moving to the US, or the requirement for students to take a language in 6th grade, but ultimately they all led me to where I am today.

Tahreem is now a Senior Program Associate at Qatar Foundation International, working on grant programs that support the establishment of Arabic programmes for primary and secondary students in the US and UK. She also manages the Arabic Honor Society, which is a programme that supports secondary students who are passionate about Arabic.