Quick Reference Guide:

Languages with Diverse Written Representations

This group of languages may be referred to as “non-alphabetic” languages or “languages that do not use the Latin alphabet” and is often included in the larger category of “less commonly taught languages” (LCTLs). Although a wide variety of languages fall within this group, Chinese, Arabic, Russian, Japanese, and Korean are among the most taught in U.S K-12 settings.[[1]](#endnote-1) Given the diversity of writing systems represented within this group (alphabets, syllabaries, characters, and combinations of two or more systems) and the challenges they may present for U.S. language learners, we refer to this group as **languages with diverse written representations (LDWRs).**

*As teaching new alphabets, characters, or symbols in isolation may cause students to feel frustrated or discouraged, educators are encouraged to simultaneously teach other topics and skills related to the language to keep students motivated and excited about learning.*

Relevant Factors in Learning LDWRs

The amount of time required to learn different LDWRs and expected proficiency outcomes may vary, but most of these languages are categorized as “Category III - languages with significant linguistic and/or cultural differences from English” (e.g., Greek, Hebrew, and Russian) or “Category IV - languages which are exceptionally difficult for native English speakers” (Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) by the [U.S. Department of State’s Foreign Service Institute](https://www.state.gov/foreign-language-training/) (FSI). Most LDWRs require more time to learn than world languages that are more similar to English, and educators working with these languages are encouraged to modify and adapt expected student outcomes accordingly. The difficulties involved in learning a new writing system may also lead to faster development of speaking and listening skills relative to reading and writing skills, so it is important for teachers to consider the pace at which students typically acquire proficiency in different skills based on the language of instruction, program type, and students’ needs and abilities. There are a number of challenges for English speakers when learning a new language with a different writing system, including (1) recognizing and memorizing new alphabets, characters, and/or symbols; (2) understanding how sounds and meanings are represented in the language; (3) learning new vocabulary; (4) understanding linguistic norms and rules; and (5) applying new knowledge to reading and writing in the language.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In addition to the general difficulties associated with learning a new writing system, the cultures associated with LDWRs may also be unfamiliar to native English speakers. There are also cultural differences within and among communities in which LDWRs are spoken, and educators are encouraged to include perspectives from majority and minority cultures in the classroom. It is important to discuss stereotypes with students who are new to learning the language, as many cultures associated with LDWRs are seen as “more foreign” than those associated with more commonly taught languages. If there are limited connections between target cultures and students’ prior knowledge, it can be difficult to provide comprehensible cultural input in the target language. Digital resources, props/manipulatives, and visual supports may be helpful when teaching about culture, and educators are encouraged to teach students simple phrases that can be used to ask for clarification or further information during cultural activities. Linguistic and cultural diversity are particularly relevant in this context, as students are further challenged by the need to learn different varieties, or distinctive forms of a language, dialects (varieties characteristic of a particular area or group) and/or registers (varieties determined by context) associated with LDWRs. The following graphic describes strategies and activities to support students’ appreciation and acquisition of different varieties of LDWRs throughout instruction and assessment.

*Teaching Language Varieties, Dialects, and Registers*

Teaching Reading and Writing

Prior to teaching reading and writing strategies, students need to learn the new alphabet, characters, or symbols used to represent the language, which may involve (1) identifying the shapes of and connections between various characters; (2) understanding new directional, spatial, or print-related patterns of the language; and (3) developing language-specific strategies to support recognition and memorization of the writing system. It is important to consider these various complexities and challenges when teaching alphabets, characters, or symbols, and it may be helpful to collaboratively brainstorm, practice, and evaluate different learning strategies to determine which approaches will best meet the needs of your students and classroom. A number of strategies can help students read new words in LDWRs, including those related to recognizing sounds, analyzing pronunciation, recognizing different forms of letters/characters/symbols, and using newly learned forms in writing. Authentic texts may be difficult to find, especially for lower-proficiency students in upper grades where there is often a mismatch between students’ interests and the proficiency levels required to interact with texts related to those interests. It may be helpful to use video-based resources, graphic novels, or books containing infographics, visuals, and graphic organizers to support students during independent reading. Educators are also encouraged to explore guided reading, collaborative reading, and choral reading to support students’ comprehension and understanding of various texts used in the classroom. Instructional considerations for writing are closely tied with those for reading, and it may be helpful to (1) introduce tasks that combine reading and writing; (2) compare different texts in the target language; (3) develop writing tasks about familiar topics and topics of interest; (4) provide opportunities to exchange written communication with native-speaking communities; and (5) give specific, actionable feedback on a continual basis during instructional time.

Recommendations for Languages with Diverse Written Representations

* Maintain use of the target language as much as possible when providing explicit instruction
* Proactively connect and collaborate with world language teachers of the same or similar languages
* Participate in professional learning communities to share instructional strategies and resources
* Take opportunities to grow your knowledge of and skills in curriculum and materials development

**Recommendations for Arabic**

* Use an integrated approach that teaches both a dialect and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)
* Incorporate top-down learning strategies and decoding instruction to support literacy development
* Expose students to unvowelized texts and vowelized texts with diacritics
* Teach how to read ahead for context, deconstruct sentences, and identify discourse markers
* Model “guttural sounds” that may require extended practice for native English speakers
* Use a combination of structured activities and performance-based activities to support pronunciation

**Recommendations for Chinese**

* Use mnemonic devices, pictures, shapes, grouping based on similarities, and color-coding to support recognition and memorization of characters and sub-characters
* Explore the relationship between meaning, pronunciation, and structure of characters
* Build students’ awareness of radicals for chunking and breaking down difficult texts
* Introduce Pinyin to support reading and written exchanges with native-speaking students
* Produce gestures indicating the tone contour, use accented Pinyin, or create Pinyin representations of words next to lines depicting the tone when teaching tones in the classroom
* Teach pronunciation rules from the beginning to support an understanding of tones and their meanings

For more research and a full bibliography for this and other QRG topics, see

[World Language Standards Literature Review Report](https://www.doe.mass.edu/worldlanguages/leader-network/literature-review.docx).

1. American Councils for International Education. (2017). *The National K-16 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey Report.* Washington, D.C. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brosh, H. (2020). The Arabic writing system: Understanding the challenges facing students and teachers. *Journal of the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages, 28,* 118-157. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)