

Transcript for Curious Nashville: “Why isn't Arabic available for Tennessee's driving exam?”

Note: Podcasts are primarily meant to be heard to capture the nuance of a human voice. We use software and humans to generate this transcript, so it may not be 100% accurate. Please check the audio.

Robotic female voice from YouTube: ... Make room for cars that are entering the freeway by: A) slowing down, B) merging into a different lane, C) maintaining your speed and position.

Tony Gonzalez, host: This is one of many YouTube videos that help people practice for the driver's license exam in Tennessee. You could listen to sample questions being read by robotic voices for hours.

Robotic voice: To pass on a two lane road. You should A) sound your horn as you pass ...

Tony: And if you prefer, there's a few in Spanish.

Robotic Voice: [Spanish language instructions]

Tony: These might not be the most entertaining videos on YouTube, but they do rack up the views. They come in handy as people are pursuing their licenses and learning how to drive, which is truly essential for so many Tennesseans.

But consider this there are also tens of thousands of residents who don't understand the languages that the exam is offered in. And that's what prompted our latest question to curious Nashville reporter Alexis Marshall is going to pick it up from here and find out: Why isn't Arabic offered on the state's driving exam?

Chapter 1: A question about language access

[00:01:05] **Alexis Marshall, reporter:** Just after English and Spanish, it's actually Arabic that's the third-most spoken language in Tennessee. Nearly 27,000 people in the state speak it. And Abram Abraham is one of them.

Abram Abraham: Hey, Alexis, how are you? Come on in.

Alexis: He's Egyptian American and runs courses to help others in his community pass their naturalization test. But he says one of the biggest barriers for his students is transportation.

Abram: With the weak public transportation system that we have, a lot of people, you know, they need cars to drive to their schools to to work, to just, you know, meet their basic needs.

Alexis: That's a sentiment that was echoed by a lot of his students at a recent night in the classroom. Some of them described riding the bus upwards of an hour for a trip that otherwise would have taken minutes. Others have to wait for friends or rideshare services to pick them up.

[voice of woman speaking Arabic]

Abram: So she she goes to work at 2 in the morning and she's not supposed to start her shift of 5 in the morning. So she had to wait three hours just to get a ride.

Alexis: With all of these complications. For thousands of residents who could benefit? Abraham asked Curious Nashville why the state doesn't offer Arabic as an option on the driver's license exam to find the answer.

Let's first talk about how the current system works. The test we're talking about is the knowledge exam, the one you take on a computer at the DMV, the tests, how? Well you know, the rules of the road. The knowledge exam is currently offered in five languages. One might expect English and Spanish, but you may not guess the other three Korean, Japanese and German. According to director of Driver Services Michael Hogan. That's the result of economic development.

Michael Hogan, Tennessee Driver Services: If you think about Korean and Japanese and this was back in the early eighties or nineties when they bought the Nissan plant in Smyrna, Tennessee. And then, of course, Germany.

Alexis: He says that was added when Volkswagen set up shop in Chattanooga. Hogan says that's how new languages have been added to the test in the past.

Michael: But we've never close the door on considering adding additional languages. It's just historically that's what it's been.

Alexis: There have been multiple calls in the last decade to add Arabic. Hogan has said it would cost between \$3,000 and \$5,000 to offer the test an Arabic potentially more to translate study materials. That's a tiny fraction of the division's annual budget of tens of millions of dollars. But he said they had other priorities back then.

If somebody like if I were to go to my source and let him know, you know, there's a there's a process for getting this done, what would be the first step in that process for him?

Michael: Have him reach out to my office. I will have and we will we will get the the conversation started and we'll set up a meeting and I'll get the right people at the table to go from there. How about that?

Alexis: So that's what Abraham did. A couple weeks later, he was explaining the transportation challenges of Arabic speakers directly to Hogan and making his own economic appeal.

Abram: And there is a lot of people that could be moving to Tennessee or choose the Tennessee as their destination when they come here. These people would would be fill in the gaps in our you know, in our factories and our really tailor stores and in multiple things.

Alexis: Hogan had already asked me to send data about what languages are most popular in Tennessee. Then he asked Abraham about whether the exam would need to be in different dialects and what Tennessee's peers are doing. Kentucky, Alabama and Georgia all offer the exam in Arabic. During the meeting, Hogan tells Abraham he's communicated up to other officials in the department.

Michael: I can't make any guarantees, but I can at least say that the ball is in a better position now than it was a month ago.

Alexis: At an apartment complex in Smyrna, Zeinab Amin walks me to her friend Rasha's building. She knows from personal experience what a difference a driver's license can make. They both moved here from Egypt in July last year and were basically homebound through much of the fall. While we chat over a plate of cookies, Amin says she studied intensely for three months to translate study materials and pass her exam. She explains through an interpreter how life has changed since receiving her license.

Laura Dean, interpreter: Life is much easier now. You're not not imprisoned in her house. And you know, if her children want to go and do something, she can take them around.

Alexis: She says having the examined Arabic would have made things a lot easier for her. But now, with a driver's license, Amin is enjoying her freedom, and she's ready to tackle some new challenges, like driving at night and navigating with jeeps.

Tony Gonzalez: This reporting from Alexis Marshall first debuted on the radio on WPLN. There's actually a bit more for us to unpack. So after a short break, we're going to take you behind the scenes and go deeper into all that she learned. You're listening to Curious Nashville.

[BREAK]

Chapter 2: More insights from this reporting

Tony: Over the years, more than a thousand questions have flowed in to Curious Nashville and this one about the driver's exam and its language accessibility. It caught my eye for a few reasons. First, the question asker Abraham. He was quite earnest. Not even a hint of being flippant or silly. He'd really put his finger on something interesting. And second, this topic seemed tailor made for Alexis Marshall. We've been working

together at the station for a couple of years. She's recently been ramping up her study of Arabic. So let's see, first off: Hi!

Alexis: Hey, how are you?

Tony: I'm doing great. Thanks for coming on Curious Nashville and for tackling this question. I'd love for you to share just a little bit more about your efforts to learn the language. What's your study like with Arabic?

Alexis: So I started in college and it was kind of before I even knew that journalism was going to be my path. But then when I decided that I wanted to be a reporter, it seemed like an even more critical skill because there are so many people in our area and across the world that do speak Arabic. So I started there, got a minor in it, and since graduating college, I've tried to continue that study. COVID has made it kind of hard. But, you know, I still practice where I can. And this fall I'm hoping to also potentially attend some formal classes again, because that would be really helpful.

Tony: Yeah, I love that. So like you're kind of personal interest eventually kind of morphed into this, you know, really practical, professional skill. I really like that. Well, so for this question about the driver's exam, I looked back at the first kind of initial messages that we had about this. We were both intrigued about the driver exam. And you noted, you know, maybe it would be a story if the state driver services division had something interesting to say. But I think your interest grew after you had your first meeting, your first conversation with Abraham. Can you tell me more about him?

Alexis: Yeah. So Abram Abraham is an Egyptian American immigrant. He became a U.S. citizen a while ago, and he runs an organization called the Bukhara Foundation and that runs classes to help other Arabic speaking immigrants prepare for things like their naturalization tests. I think they also have some English classes, so that's kind of his background. And he was saying that that's part of why he came to us with this question, because transportation is a big issue for the students trying to make it to his classes.

Abram: I want to tell you that everyone here wants to learn English. You know, they need to learn English because they want to make more money. They want to receive promotions from their jobs. And they understand deeply that if we don't speak English, we're not going to get these promotions. But again, how can they actually go to schools if they are not allowed to drive? You know, imagine how can you accommodate any schedule with taken? I'm going to give you an example. Going from Antioch to say the other side of downtown will take you about 15 minutes if you're driving a car. But if you are actually taking a bus, it could take you up up to an hour and a half.

Alexis: Yeah. So Abraham was talking about how that extra time on the bus is a big barrier. Other people are relying on things like rideshare services, which can be costly, or just having a friend or a family member to be their main source of transportation. All of that is a really big issue when people are trying to get jobs. A lot of times the first thing that people ask you when you're applying for a job is do you have a reliable form

of transportation? So that's become a really big issue and and can really hinder people from becoming, quote unquote, productive members of society.

Tony: Well, so as it goes, though, you know, these curious questions, they kind of unfurl one step at a time. So we were kind of intrigued. Then you learned a little bit more from him. But if I'm not mistaken, I think then some census data really provided kind of an aha moment for you. Can you talk about that?

Alexis: Sure. I've been nerding out a little bit looking at demographic data in general from the census. I found it really interesting. There are these tables from the American Community Survey that offer kind of a snapshot of things like wages and migration patterns and language use, like the language that people speak at home. I went looking to fact check Abram's claim that Arabic is the third most spoken language in Tennessee, which turned out to be true. And not only did I find that that was correct, but I also found that there were way fewer speakers of languages like Korean and German compared to Arabic. That's also probably true for Japanese, but it's kind of hard to tell based on the way that the data is presented. So it kind of lumps Japanese in with other Asian Pacific Islander languages. But all that to say Arabic is spoken a lot more than some of the other languages that are offered on Tennessee's written driver's exam.

Tony: Yeah, I mean, so bottom line, it's like it's not that they just take the ranking of the most common languages. There's there's something else at play.

Alexis: Exactly like nearly 27,000. Tennesseans speak Arabic at home. Meanwhile, only about 8000 speak Korean, but that one is offered on the driver's exam. Arabic is not.

Tony: Really good numbers. Those are some really illuminating stats about languages in Tennessee. Of course, behind the numbers are the people, right? Our neighbors. You ended up talking to two women who had moved to Tennessee from Egypt last year, Zainab and Rasha, about their experience without a license and those challenges. I want to play some extended tape from from your time with them, because I just think you really hear a lot when they're kind of thinking through what their life has been like and what it really has meant to get their licenses.

Alexis: Now, before you got your license, were both of you relying on Uber?

Rasha and Zeinab: Yeah.

Alexis: Yeah. And how long was that?

Zeinab: Nine months.

Zeinab: I'm still. For now.

Alexis: Still Uber?

Zeinab: [Arabic conversation]

Laura Dean, interpreter: So her husband used to drive her, but he. His work starts at 4:30 in the morning, her starts at five. And so before he used to drive her. But then he'd be late for work. And so she said, No, it's okay, I'll take an Uber.

Alexis: So I want to shout out Laura Dean, who was our interpreter for that trip. She really helped me connect with Rasha and Zeinab because she had actually spoken with them for for another story. But I mean, that's just a a small glimpse of like how expensive it can be to not have a license in Tennessee, you know, sometimes 13, \$14 a day just to get to work. And then on top of that, potentially having to uber home or relying on your husband to drive you home, sometimes going up to \$50 a day. And she also told me later on that sometimes she would search for a driver so that she could get to work by 5 a.m. and sometimes there would just not be any drivers. And so she couldn't go to work, so she would miss out on that day's pay. More recently, Zainab and Rasha now both do have licenses, but it's affected their lives in different ways. So Rasha is still not driving. And that's actually because really shortly — like right before she got her license or right after — she had a really scary experience driving, somebody almost hit her and it really shook her up. So she's still uber ing for now, but I think going to slowly ease her way back into it. And then Zeinab said that it's changed her life. She says that she has more freedom now. And she talked about, you know, being able to drive her husband to work because he really doesn't speak enough English to to pass the exam yet. So she's been able to to really help her family by being the first one in it to get this license.

Tony: Well, I really love that you got to spend some time with them and really kind of understand their day to day lives. I do want to look forward here to the future of the driving test in Tennessee as part of this reporting. You know, you got to sit in on a conversation between Abraham and a state official who at least seemed open to some new ideas for for language offerings. So what do you plan to do, you know, going forward to keep an eye on the story?

Alexis: So at this point, I think it's kind of a waiting game. I texted Abraham right after the story aired and asked him if he had heard anything else from the director of Driver Services. And he says, not yet. So I'll be keeping tabs, kind of keeping an eye on my inbox for updates from the state, because it did seem like things were maybe possibly starting to move in this direction.

Tony: Well, Lexi, thanks so much for for taking on this question and for coming to talk about it.

Alexis: Well, thank you for having me, Tony, and thanks for sending it my way.

Tony: Yeah, you bet. And hey, listeners, if you have questions about something that you've noticed like this, somewhere in Nashville, in middle Tennessee, you can always ask us that question. It's really simple. It takes a minute or so. Go to WPLN.org/Curious

and you can type in your question there; if it catches our eye, you might hear it on a future episode.

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