

Areas of Weakness in Learning English for Arab Students

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Abstract: Arab students often experience problems when pronouncing English phonemes and letters because of the multiple local dialects and accents. Each language across the world has its own rules and semantic qualities that distinguish it from other languages. Generations inherit these oral characteristics from the ancient without choice to make their particular linguistic formation, and this becomes a constant custom. Arabic ESL learners encounter various pronunciation hurdles when working to develop the fluency of their English language, which impacts how learners study to form English letter sounds. This paper examines the problems experienced by Arab students in acquiring English as a second language. The research will explore differences between English and their native language, which makes it difficult to learn English, the various problems that students encounter, communication problems and teaching strategies, writing and speaking problems, and associated reasons for the different problems, general causes of weaknesses Arabs face when learning English, and the proposed solutions to improve English proficiency.

Keywords: Arab students, English language, students encounter, communication problems, teaching strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

Many countries across the world recognize the English language as a means of communication, and it is used in teaching and student learning. Learning English as a second language is influenced by the first language, and the influential role depends on contextual factors that include the level of exposure to these languages, pedagogical practices, and classroom settings (Al-Nasser, 2015). The knowledge of the mother tongue can positively influence the development of English proficiency as a second language. However, studies found mother tongue interference to be a major barrier for the Arab English learners because Arabic and English are two diverse language groups. The sounds in the English alphabet are very different from those in Arabic. In most cases, Arabic learners who leave school after studying English for approximately 9 years are not able to write or speak a single perfect English sentence, and this is of great concern because it raises questions about the suitability of methods employed in teaching or the soundness of teachers. English Education in Saudi Arabia faces major problems that can be addressed by understanding the areas of weakness that affect Arab students' learning English. Arab learners have specific weaker areas, and the problems require proper and specific considerations from teachers of English as a second language (ESL).

Arabic is a descendant of Semitic languages and is the mother tongue of more than 300 million people. English mainly started from the Anglo-Frisian languages and is considered an Indo-European language that is, without a doubt, regarded as a first-world language, including in countries that do not use it as a first language (Alkhafeel & Elkholly, 2022). Many Arab countries use English as a main language in class to help students acquire it, but most students do not comprehend the English language, which teachers find hard to solely depend on the English language when teaching Arab students. The issue of acquiring a new language has led to supporting and opposing ideas, where some believe the first language can prevent students from learning English language while others think the use of the mother tongue language will help learners in acquiring a new language. As many think, using the mother tongue of students is the best way to teach the English language. Teachers are advised to appropriately use their mother tongue by avoiding overuse that can limit the ability of learners to comprehend foreign languages until they are translated into their native languages. This research paper focuses on the weaknesses that Arab students face when learning the English language and the solutions to the challenges.

Differences Between English and Arab Languages

English and Arabic have completely different structural systems that can confuse students from Arab countries, who often get confused when learning English because of the entrenched Arabic structure. Arabic belongs to the Semitic family and English belongs to the Western Germanic family, which is different and distant (Alshalaan, 2020). Besides, the type of sentences in both languages differ. Arabic has verbal and nominal sentences, whereas English has only verbal sentences. A nominal sentence consists of two nouns and does not need to have any kind of verb. Grammatically correct English sentences must have a verb, a subject, and an object, whereby the sentence begins with the subject, then a verb, and ends with the object. Therefore, English sentences have a clear pattern in their structure. Arabic has two different types of sentence structure, which are stated earlier as verbal and nominal sentences. The pattern followed in verbal sentences has a different order that begins with a verb, then subjects, and lastly an object. The order of the pattern is different from that of the English language, but the components are similar. Nominal sentences do not have a verb at all and only have two parts that include the subject and the predicate. These sentences have the “be” form of the verbs in the English language, but Arabic does not use any type of verb. The confusion causes many Arab students to make common mistakes in sentence structures. For example, when translating sentences from the Arabic language to the English language.

The Foreign Service Institute categorizes Arabic as a level V dialectal, suggesting that it is the toughest out of all the language challenging groups for English speakers to acquire (Chasen-Buckley, 2020). A major similarity that English and Arabic languages share is that they have an alphabet. The sound of each language can phonetically be converted between the languages to translate, but they still have their differences. English has an overall of 26 letters, and Arabic uses a total of 28 letters. Arabic letters mostly sound the same when pronounced, and the script is written from right to left. Arabic has only three vowels, and its most difficult aspect is susceptibility to change. English has six vowels, and it is written from left to right. The Arab English students experience difficulties because the English alphabet is extremely dynamical in how it is pronounced. The places of articulation in the English sound differ from those of Arabic, and some English consonants are not present in Arabic and vice versa (Alshalaan, 2020). Arabic learners find it difficult to pronounce some English letters, forcing them to substitute them with other letters that are easier to pronounce.

Various Problems Arab Students Encounter in Learning English.

Saudi Arabian educational institutions and authorities or policymakers have aggressively taken up the cause of English propagation and brought teaching and learning of the English language to the center stage in KSA’s educational system due to its position in the contemporary world (Al-Nasser, 2015). English is a global need and not a matter of regional interest alone. The number of English users has consistently increased because of greater globalization. Learning the English language can be problematic for students of any first language, but some languages provide some respite because they share similarities, making it possible to understand a few words or have good pronunciation. Languages like Arabic do not have similarities that can connect with the English language. Teachers who do not have familiarity with or lack an understanding of Arabic get overwhelmed teaching students who speak the language. Arab students learning English experience many problems in acquiring the language, and the difficulties experienced in the process include the mother tongue influence, grammar, alphabet, vocabulary, accent, and pronunciation.

Many researchers agree on some reasons that they believe contribute to the problems encountered by Arab EFL students while learning English. The problems can include weaknesses stemming from the English curriculum and personal lack of motivation. The primary types of problems experienced are that students keep committing errors in spelling, pronunciation, morphology, and syntax. Besides, students are also unable to express themselves efficiently and comfortably when dealing with academic or everyday topics. The reading problems, a common problem for Arab students learning the English language, can occur due to misunderstandings of teachers regarding the reading process, irregularities in English spelling and pronunciation, and linguistic incompetence.

Arab students learning English experience problems emanating from policy and its implementation. The specific problem of mother tongue influence occurs because the learning of the English language is introduced at a late stage, by which learners do not see the need to acquire the new language. At a late stage, students have less intense need to learn English than they would have had in childhood. Therefore, the primary challenge that Arab students face during English acquisition and proficiency is linked to the structural disparities between their mother tongue or native language and English as a second language (Eid, 2024). For instance, Arabic script adheres to distinct punctuation conventions and does not employ capitalization. Spelling also creates problems because the Arabic language uses a single letter for every phoneme, which

makes the English orthography significantly complex. Students face difficulties spelling silent letters situated in most English words, such as knowledge and half. The differing conventions in the contexts of Arabic and English present a challenge for students when applying conjunctions and commas. The problem is also experienced when using English propositions. Many Arabic students choose to translate Arabic propositions into English because of their diverse nature and application.

The pronunciation of English words poses challenges for Arab students learning English, which is why, in their articulation, Arabic speakers often apply Arabic phonetics. For instance, the challenges of pronunciation cause Arabs to pronounce the term “stupid” as “istobbid,” and also pronounce “pregnant” as “brignent” (Grewal & Manuel, 2018). English has more vowel sounds than Arabic. This makes English vowels problematic for Arab students, and the challenge is vividly noticeable when it comes to differences between short and long sounds, like in sheep and ship. The challenges are also evident when differentiating words like pat, pet, pot, and many others, which have short vowel sounds. Arabic lacks numerous vowels and diphthongs, and places stress more on articulation than English. The challenges are common because Arabic has two kinds of vowels, unlike English, which has long vowels and short vowels. Short vowels, also known as Harakat, are used to instruct the students in teaching books. Long vowels help to lengthen the short vowels. Arabic students may encounter many problems in English pronunciation because they are not familiar with speech sounds that do not exist in their mother tongue. The Arabic language’s speech sounds do not have equivalents in the English language. Many speech sounds in the English language are not found in the Arabic language. The variations in the speech sounds of the Arabic and the English language make Arab students acquiring English language experience adverse effects in the course of learning and also face strains in understanding.

A different writing style for English and Arabic makes reading and writing challenging because English is written from left to right, and Arabic is written in reverse, from right to left. It becomes more confusing and complicated reading books, particularly for adult learners, than for those who study both languages in their early years. Punctuation in Arabic is introduced at elementary school and is given less consideration. The Arabic language does not have upper- and lower-case letters, thus, it is common to have Arabic students mixing small and big letters within sentences, and the need for punctuation in the English language makes it more complicated.

Communication Problems

There are generally four basic skills involved in the process of learning languages. The receiving processes are reading and listening, and these skills are how people acquire meaning from the discourse (Elttayef & Hussein, 2017). The productive skills enable meaningful communication among students with each other, and the process involves writing and speaking. Many factors contribute to communication problems among EFL students, some of which can be associated with the students themselves, the learning environment, the curriculum, and teaching strategies. Arab students experience difficulty using English for communication. They often lack the appropriate vocabulary required to get meaning across when involved in authentic communicative situations, making it difficult to keep the engagement going for an extended period (Rass, 2015). Several complaints have been made about the weaknesses in the English of graduate students who enrolled in schools as English language learners or English language majors. The seriousness of the communication problem makes Arab English students face challenges in all the language skills, including writing, reading, speaking, and listening. The seriousness of the problem can be seen in the great number of erroneous utterances that Arab students learning English as a second language generate in their recourse to communication strategies and oral performance.

Oral communication is an indispensable and unavoidable component in any interpersonal encounter, since effective functioning requires people to communicate with one another. The ability to confidently and fluently communicate in English is a vital skill that Arab students learning English need to maintain in multicultural and multilingual contexts (Abdelgadir, 2019). The fear of cross-cultural differences makes most Arab students avoid communicating in English. Students face challenges in communication because they lack intercultural competence. Most communication problems are related to pronunciation, stress, and intonation, particularly due to the differences in English and Arabic pronunciations. Communication problems linked to pronunciation for learners of the English language are often in three broad types that are Combinatorial, Segmental, and Suprasegmental. The segmental consonant problem is that the interdental fricatives have similar spelling letters or two initial letters that come to represent only one sound. For instance, /θ/ in thousand / θauzænd/ and [t] Thomas /toməs/. Another communication problem is experienced in pronouncing the letter <s> at the plural ends (s) that stays /s/ in books/buks/, but in dogs changes to /z/ in /dogz/.

Some words with the same sound and different meanings create problems for Arabic students learning English during communication. For example, /rait/ refers to <right>, the opposite of left or <right>, which means correct, and <write>, the act of using a hand or pen. The systematic use of weak or reduced forms of English contributes to the challenges experienced in the communication process. Some English words have different pronunciations in different words, with different sounds and accents. Contrastive vowel sounds are not phonemic in Arabic. Most Arabic dialects encompass /ee/ instead of [(i), (e)]. The vowels in the English language are all voiced, such that there is no point of articulation. There is a need for instructors to provide new language rules to the students in patterns of contrast and let students extensively practice the patterns through drills until the internalization of rules as habits to reduce the problematic areas of different sounds in communication. The Arabic language does not have the consonant /p/, which causes confusion in communication, and most Arab students replace it with /b/. /b/ is a voiced bilabial stop, and /p/ is a separate phoneme (Othman & Abubaker, 2022). They say <beoble> for people and <bray> for pray. The differences in some English and Arabic words are in the point of articulation. Some characteristics of the Arabic language are not present in English. Students experience confusion in some areas, and teachers have to be keen listeners to get their learners' pronunciation or replacement.

Strategies in Teaching English to Arab Students

Learning a new language is exciting, and Arabic students bring unique strengths from their mother tongue when learning English as a second language. The differences in pronunciation, writing skills, and grammar experienced when studying English present opportunities for Arab students to build new skills and expand their linguistic knowledge. Many teaching strategies have been studied in various contexts, and they are classroom methods and techniques used by teachers to introduce the contents of learning to students and help them acquire the new language (Ramahi, 2025). The strategies used in teaching English to the Arab students that will be discussed in this section include flipped classroom teaching, computer-assisted language learning, and cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy that involves the use of small groups of students working together to positively impact the learning of each other. It requires students to work in groups, and efforts are made to ensure they have a positive experience. Cooperative teaching strategy undoubtedly enhances the cultural and social awareness of students. The relationship between students is likely to become stronger when they work together on a project. The method motivates students' learning of English and promotes interaction. English teachers consider the structured application of cooperative learning as beneficial to Arab students learning English as their second language. Students can improve their communication and speaking skills because this teaching strategy contributes to learning engagement, cultural responsiveness, social awareness, and general learning needs (Ramahi, 2025). Cooperative learning enables students to learn and improve in an environment that caters to their emotional well-being and respects their different levels and needs. Teachers consider this mode of instruction as important in supporting the social and cultural awareness of students and enhancing their interpersonal skills. Besides, cooperative teaching strategy helps reduce the anxiety felt by students, particularly when applied as a constructive context of differentiation.

Flipped classroom instruction is another teaching strategy that can work well for Arab students learning English. This teaching strategy is a new pedagogical method that uses problem-based activities to solve problems in the classroom and asynchronous video lectures and practice problems. A flipped classroom means teaching events that usually take place inside the classroom are conducted outside, and vice versa. Researchers have found that teachers who use flipped classroom instruction in an ESL writing setting report better student understanding, improved writing abilities, and an increase in their level of knowledge. This approach gives learners ample time to prepare and enables them to use key language features with reduced pressure. Many students feel independent and motivated in the learning process, which allows English learners to engage with other students in a different environment. Flipped classroom instruction keeps students busy completing their assignments and working in teams, allowing teachers to give them more time to study and learn from each other, leading to higher-quality education.

Computer-Assisted Language Learning is a strategy of teaching and learning language through the use of computer technology as an aid to assessment, reinforcement, and presentation of materials to be learned, and also includes immersive and interactive elements (Ramahi, 2025). The computer helps to promote interaction, assist students, and do presentations, and this technique is influential in the development of materials used in learning the English language, thus facilitating the entire learning environment. Although studies examining the use of CALL as a teaching strategy for learning English as a second language are scarce, existing findings consider it an effective tool for improving the acquisition of the English

language. Teachers consider the use of the CALL strategy in the instruction of Arab students learning English as vital, making the strategy receive considerable attention from various education stakeholders. CALL can increase the development of reading skills and is also associated with increased student motivation. CALL programs can help Arab students learn acoustically and visually, hear, see the language, and speak it with the computer program. Technology helps students learn to read English as a second language by incorporating animated materials, visual or auditory materials, and music or sound effects that are more engaging to students to increase active participation in the learning process (Kingston, 2023). However, this strategy works well when there is an opportunity to interact with teachers, peer collaboration, and working in groups.

Writing and Speaking Problems Students Face, and the Reasons for These Problems.

Arabic substantially differs from English, which greatly affects how Arab students write and speak in English. For instance, the Arabic language does not have articles like “the” or “a” and has a different sentence structure compared to that in English. Arabic encourages errors in writing due to the limited writing instructions and academic models of writing. Many Arab countries teach English as a second language in schools, but students are not trained in formal academic writing skills, which makes it difficult for them to write properly (Mahjabeen et al., 2025). The largest difference between English and Arabic is the sentence structure. Generally, English follows a structure of subject-verb-object, which is not the case for the Arabic language. The subject-verb agreement, propositions, and articles make most Arab students learning English suffer from grammatical errors that make an English sentence incorrect. Explicit teaching of students to write in English as a foreign language is vital for Arab students because they are not familiar with the authentic academic writing model. The lack of extensive instruction on writing is a significant problem that Arab students experience when writing English. Formative feedback on the writing skills of students serves as a way to enhance their writing abilities. Arab students do not receive detailed feedback, which makes their writing contain the same errors continuously.

Researchers have examined grammar struggles in academic writing that many ESL learners experience to show how they affect their writing and speaking skills. The English dialect has many idiosyncrasies and irregularities that cause problems in writing a speaking of English language (Atashian & Al-Bahri, 2018). The use of diverse sentence types, tense agreement, modifier placements, and parallel structures is required to have well-developed grammar skills both in writing and speaking. Verbal literacy is vital in acquiring the English language, but writing is linked to the acquisition of linguistic knowledge. Any student learning English as a second language who do not strive to improve their writing and speaking skills may find it difficult to develop their careers. The alphabetic system in the Arabic and English languages creates obstacles for Arab students learning English. Writing and speaking performance of a student is the best ways to determine their mastery of the language (Dhanapal & Agab, 2023). Meticulous attention is required when writing because the process of writing involves communicating ideas and thoughts that can be spoken, but in a readable form using symbols like spaces, punctuation, and alphabet letters. Inputs like listening and reading skills help to master the writing skills and help catch up minor spelling mistakes to poor sentence structure.

Causes of Arab Learners’ Weakness in General.

The general errors made by learners of the second language help to understand specific linguistic challenges they face. The weaknesses can be caused by intralingual and interlingual errors (Babu Rajan et al., 2024). Interlingual errors faced by Arab students learning English occur when they transfer elements from their mother tongue or the Arabic language into the English language. The grammatical, cultural, lexical, and syntactic norms of Arabic and English differ, leading to possible errors. Arab students may accurately construct sentences in their mother tongue, but directly translating them into English may generate inaccurate sentences.

Problems or confusions can occur due to interlingual errors that literally transfer phrasal verbs or idiomatic expressions from the Arab language to English. General problems in this category fall within the grammatical domains of syntax and word order, such as the subject-verb-object structure of English that differs from Arabic (Radi, 2023). English uses this pattern when writing or speaking sentences in passive voice. Arab learners of English face problems when using relative clauses, and the struggle often makes them omit them or create complex structures. Also, English and Arabic have distinct systems for expressing verb tenses. English uses auxiliary verbs, while Arabic depends on modifications. The differences create problems related to verb omissions and verb tense usage. The use of failure to use confusing articles like a, an, and the is one of the problems Arab students make. These English articles cause a lot of problems for the learners because Arabic does not have definite and indefinite articles. This makes Arab students misuse articles or omit them while learning English

as their second language. A lot of practice is required to master the use of articles for Arab learners to overcome the problems caused by interlingual interference.

Interlingual errors are errors within the language, and they occur when Arab students learning English make mistakes that are not influenced by their Arabic language but are caused by a lack of knowledge about the English language structure and rules (Babu Rajan et al., 2024). The problems or mistakes are caused by the lexicon, syntax, pronunciation, and grammar of the English language. Arab students may misinterpret and internalize the rules of writing or communicating in English. For instance, they may incorrectly use prepositions or make mistakes when using verb tenses. The most common causes of Arab learners' weaknesses include the overgeneralization of grammar rules. Arabic learners apply rules learned for situations that do not apply in English as their secondary language. For instance, Arab students who have learned that the regular past tense of the English language ends in "ed" may apply this rule incorrectly to irregular verbs. Another factor leading to weakness associated with intralingual errors is simplification, in which learners seem to simplify complex linguistic structures by replacing or eliminating elements of the English language to establish more direct sentences and end up omitting auxiliaries. Besides, Arab students often select English words similar to their Arabic equivalents in pronunciation, meaning, and spelling. This makes them commit semantic and lexical errors, such as substituting the term bookstore with library. For example, Arabs designate all academic institutions as schools, and they include universities, colleges, and secondary or primary schools, but this only refers to a primary or a high school in English.

Proposed Solutions to Improve English Proficiency

Learning a new language can be problematic for Arab students because of the differences between the English and Arabic languages, but those learning English as a second language can acquire the skills quickly and master it if appropriate measures are considered. Arabic ranks among the most difficult languages in the world, and the problems experienced by Arab students learning English are similar to those of English students learning Arabic (Brenneise, 2021). The best solution to help Arabic students learning English as their second language is teaching them how to write in an academic register to help them default from social or casual language and express themselves in an academic setting. Arab English learners have a harder time processing spoken English. Use of visual means like writing on the board or using computer-based learning is vital to avoid giving instructions in the air. Teachers should focus on building in more group work, hence the need to improve teacher teacher-student ratio and give English learners more time to practice. Most students lack background information about the English language, especially with things that are unique to Westernized or American culture. Certain vocabulary should be taught to such students, and even show them videos of things that are not common in their mother tongue.

2. CONCLUSION

People communicate their knowledge, feelings, or beliefs verbally to express them to others. Language is a systematic expression of feelings and thoughts using words, symbols, and sounds, making communication an important part of human life, but there are prevailing challenges when conversation is conducted in foreign languages. Arabic-speaking students experience different challenges when learning English, particularly due to structural differences between Arabic and the English language. The differences make it harder for the brain to process, and it becomes difficult to learn English for the Arab students (Eid, 2024). Culture is an inseparable part of the bedrock of language education. Learning a foreign language or English as a second language for Arab students includes conveying knowledge about the Western or American culture, and developing communication competence or Arabic language in the English language. Teaching a foreign language is similar to teaching a foreign culture or other people's way of life. People from Arab countries are not immune to challenges from other cultures that are not English-speaking. Speaking and writing are difficult skills for Arab students learning English due to the differences in vocabulary and mechanics, which require the use of the right capitalization, spelling, and punctuation.

English and Arabic show obvious variations in terms of pronunciation, stress patterns on articulation, and intonation. Arabic is simple and regular in consonants and representation of long vowels compared to the English language, which appears more complicated. Native Arabic speakers learning English often insert vowel sounds between or before the consonant clusters, creating wild pronunciation and more syllable errors. The current essay indicates that many problems that Arab students learning English as their second language are due to the variations between their mother tongue and the English language. The paper recommends that the Ministry of Education train teachers of English on how to deal with the variations in culture, introduce the use of visuals when teaching languages, and improve the teaching environment for the learners.

Also, the world is increasingly globalized, and the English language is necessary to interact with people from diverse cultures. There is a need to introduce English learning at an earlier stage in education when children have a higher interest in the language, and minimize the impact of the native language.

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