Factors Affecting the Language Learning Process among Saudi Students

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Abstract

Arab government has a strong realization and a mounting sense of awareness that in spite of the fact that Arabic language has the most prestigious status among the languages but they still need to learn English as a second language for certain reasons. The concept of globalization, the world of business and the social situation around is demanding for a warm welcome to learning of English. The Saudi government is, therefore, allocating a generous amount of funds to promote the students for the English language learning process and to facilitate them. They are hiring qualified, competent and committed foreign faculty members to teach English to the Arab students. They are offering attractive packages along with all the fringe benefits to the employees to get the maximum output from them. At the same time they are offering foreign scholarships to their graduates and sending them abroad to lessen the dependence on the hired faculty in future. Moreover, they are convincing and financially supporting their youth (male/female) who had discontinued their education years ago to re-continue it.

English and Arabic are two different languages. Their alphabets, sounds, vowel patterns, pronunciation, capitalization style, articles, even the writing style are different. English is written from left to right whereas Arabic moves from right to left. Moreover, the cultural background of the speakers of both the languages is poles apart. Since language is a living and complicated phenomenon its hegemonic effect is most often related to the interests of the local elites.

Moreover the Arab learners of the English language do not acquire English because that is imposed on them by the British council. They, instead, prefer to learn English to enable them to socialize and to go beyond their local group.

It is generally believed that English is a medium to obtain, not only the power and the prestige but pragmatic aims in which they (the

people) could maximize their ability to be one of the multilingual and multicultural societies. Some people count it as a bridge leading to many advantages related to business, commerce, industry, and economic progress.

Arab students face a lot of difficulties in learning the English language. Most of them are due to the basic structural differences between Arabic and English. I have tried to encompass the most prominent ones in my article.

1. Arabic language has no capitalization and its punctuation conventions are very different from the English language. "It has no distinction between the upper case and the lower case." (Sofer & Raimes, 2002)

The students face problem while writing because they often forget to begin a sentence with a capital letter. They even get confused while writing their names, and those of cities, countries and books etc. They lose marks owing to this difficulty and take a considerable time in getting used to capitalization.

2. The general question of how bad or good… children are at spelling was investigated by the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER) (Brook et at, 1993), who looked at essays written by 1492 secondary school children in England…

The NEFR research classified spelling mistakes into five major categories:

- Insertion of extra letters, such as the <l>added to 'until' instead of **{untill}**
- Omission of letters, such as the <r> missing from 'occuring' instead of **{occurring}**
- Substitution of different letters, such as <a> instead of <i> in 'definate' instead of **{definite}**
- Transposition of two letters, such as <ei> for <ie> in 'freind' instead of **{friend}**
- Grapheme substitution involving more than two letters but only a single cause, for example when an equivalent according to sound correspondence rules is substituted for the usual form, as in 'thort' for "thought" (Cook 2002)

3. Arabic has one letter for each sound so spellings are much easier in Arabic as compared to English. In Arab countries schools don't give spelling tests, because spelling is not a problem with

the Arabic language. Arab students tend to make spelling mistakes in their writings because of the silent alphabets as in Arabic there are no silent alphabets in the middle of the words. They usually misspell the words like 'half' 'care' and 'knowledge' etc.

Some of the Arabic alphabets are different from the English ones in sounds. They don't pronounce <dha>'d' and make it, <th> (ذ) sound. 'P' <pa> is pronounced like 'b', <ba>, (ب) 'ch' i.e. <cha> (ج) is pronounced like 'sh' <sha>, (ش) 't' <ta> (ط) becomes a liquid sound of <ta> (ت). In contrast, the sounds like 'b' (ب) 'z', (ذ) 'k', (ك) 'm', (م) 'n' (ن), 'f' (ف) and 'j' (ج) are all just the same.

Tâ marbûta (ة) is usually silent in modern Arabic. In classical Arabic it is pronounced as 'tâ'. Hamza (ء) represents the glottal stop. This sound is present in English but it has no alphabet. It is sometimes represented by a – as in (uh-oh). The counterpart of 'l'is (ل) but is it not pronounced on exactly the same manner. The counterpart or 'r' is known as (ر) It is pronounced in a different way in English, it is trilled (rolled over 'r').

The following sounds do not exist in Arabic hence the Arab students are likely to make mistakes in their speech as well as writing. They substitute or borrow them from some other sounds in English:

Actual sound	Borrowed sound	Actual word	Borrowed word
V	(f)	serve	surf
P	(b)	park	bark
G	(j)	galaxy	jalaksy
CH	(sh)	chair	share

Arab speakers attempt to pronounce English words while using the Arabic phonetic methodology and in doing so face severe pronunciation problems. For them 'stupid' becomes "istobbid", and 'pregnant' becomes "brignent".

"Trying to get students to be like a native speaker is ineffective; their minds and their knowledge of language will inevitably be different." The purpose of language learning for different students is always different and personal, which is not the same as that of the monolingual. "Students

can become successful L2 users rather than forever 'failing' the native speaker target" (Cook 1999)

4. Another most common problem with Arab students is the use of commas and conjunctions, which are totally different in Arabic and English languages. "In English, items in a series are separated by commas and the co-ordinate conjunction 'and' is used just before the last word". In Arabic each item in a series is precede by the conjunction 'wa'(و) which is equivalent to 'and'. (Diab, 1996)

5. Prepositions pose a great difficulty for an ESL learner. Since there are various prepositions in English that have the same function. The students when they are not sure which preposition will be more appropriate tend to compare the sentence with its Arabic equivalence. They prefer to give a literal translation of that Arabic preposition in English. "However prepositions seldom have a one to one correspondence between English and Arabic. An Arabic preposition may be translated by several English prepositions while an English usage may have several Arabic translations". (Scott & Tucker, 1974, p.85)

6. Articles in Arabic and English are not always the same. Sometimes articles are omitted in Arabic whereas they are found in English thus they create problems for Arab learners of the English language. In English abstract words referring to ideas, attributes or qualities are used without the article 'the' to refer to that idea or that attribute etc. which belongs to everybody or everything.

Piety is my pride.   (Alfaqar-o-fakhree)
Pious man   (Alrajl-al-sualeh)
Evil is a negative power. (Alshr-o-quwah manfee)

In Arabic the definite article looks like a prefix in a sentence e.g. "Alshams", 'The Sun'.

In Arabic however such abstract words are preceded by a definite article equivalent to 'the' in English. Hence the students commit errors pertaining to misuse of articles.

7. Like any vocalized language English has five vowels a, e, i, o, u, which are clearly spelled out in a text and play an important role, being the most prominent and central sound of a syllable. They help to join letters so that a full sound can be achieved. In Arabic

there are no such vowels hence there is no such exact correspondence between the English and Arabic language.
As compared to twenty six letters in English alphabets there are twenty nine alphabets in Arabic. All the alphabets in Arabic are consonants. The alphabets 'alif',(ا) 'waw'(و) and 'ya'(ى) are used as long vowels or diphthongs and they also play the role of weak consonants. However, for the non-Arabs who learn Arabic as a second language the vowel signs have been developed as zabar, (´) zer, (,) and pesh (') which are not a part of Arabic letters. These vowels are only found in religious texts and are rarely found in newspapers and magazines. The native Arab speakers know them very well even if they are not indicated in writings.

In spite of all these differences of Arabic as L1 and English as L2 it is an encouraging factor that the students show a remarkable progress in English Language learning process. They acquire an improved level of competence and proficiency even within the first year (prep year) at the university. It owes to some interesting factors in the teaching-learning situation. I have tried to capture the details based on my teaching experience.

The motivational level for learning the English language among the native Arab students is quite high (besides their personal reasons) owing to the efforts of the government, the encouraging attitude of the teachers, peers, parents and the society.

The medium of communication is thoroughly English at the university level. The teachers hired from foreign countries either have no or a very limited knowledge of Arabic language hence the students have no choice but to communicate in English. Although before joining the university they (the students) are exposed to the English language for six years but still on the very first day they communicate through a mixture of their native language (Arabic) and some physical gestures but with in the first few weeks they improve a lot.

The educational accessories, laptop, digital and electronic dictionaries are very popular and the students have an easy access to them. The students can easily search the requisite information from different resources. Books are provided free of cost to the students.

The environment overall is very encouraging and supportive for the learning and practice of English language. The students are never shy and hesitant of making mistakes in using the language in practical situations. They don't fear criticism or ridicule from the people around

them. The policy of the Saudi government is quite successful and a lot of students are re-continuing their education after a break.

Arabs have a God-gifted capability of memorizing things which is extra-ordinary and unusual. They can easily follow the formula-based teaching of English language and can apply the rules of grammar in their further studies.

The grammatical structure of Arabic and English is the same i.e. (S-V-O) 'subject' followed by 'verb' which is further followed by an 'object'. It helps the Arab students a lot in translation from one language to another.

Arabic language borrows some of its words and terminologies directly from the English language. It provides no parallels or substitute-words for the original English words it rather gives them an Arabic touch by the use of Arabic alphabets:

> Electronics
> Strategy
> Television
> Internet
> Computer
> Plaza
> Petrol
> Digital dictionary
> Scientific & Non-scientific Calculators

Hence the students can feel quite comfortable while learning the actual words.

The factors affecting the process of English language learning among the Arab students are diverse and vary from individual to individual. The most important factor is that "we cannot really teach language, we can only create conditions in which it will develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way", Von Humboldt (Corder, 1967) and that is what is happening in Saudi Arabia very successfully.

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Most of the research is based on the personal teaching experience in the classes of the native Saudis of 18-23 years (age group) and the evaluation of their performance based on four major quizzes, Mid-term and final-term exams.