

# Challenges Faced By Arab Students in Learning English

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**Abstract – Present paper is a deep study of the challenges faced by Arab learners in learning English as a second language. The paper will explore the differences between English and their native language which makes learning English a strenuous job for them. The article also aims to particularly examine some contributing factors like dominance of their 1st language, some missing sounds in Arabic and the difference between the structure of their native language and English which again increase complications in their language acquisition.**

**Key Words: First Language, Acquisition, Structure and Syntax, Speech Sounds.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Acquiring knowledge is considered to be a continuous process which goes on until a person dies. Learning a language is a fascinating and intriguing process. Learning the first language is always the easiest and most interesting experience where a toddler is taught a language in the comfortable surroundings of his home and in the company of his parents or loved ones. However, experience of learning a second language is entirely different and challenging as it is learnt in the restricted environment of a class or school under the guidance of a professional tutor. Learning English is particularly difficult in the middle East Asian region as their native language Arabic is extremely distinct in its structure and grammar as compared to English. That's why Arab learners find learning English an extremely arduous task. They tend to make mistakes in English pronunciation, orthography, vocabulary usage and grammar as there is always a connection between the learner's native language and the specific difficulties in learning and using English. The article will primarily focus on the challenges encountered by Arab students in the context of dominance of first language, difference in the structure of both the languages and absence of some sounds in the first language.

## DOMINANCE OF L1, ARABIC

One of the most prominent reasons of the challenges faced by Arab students in acquiring the skills of both oral and written communication in English is the influence of their first language, Arabic. The supremacy of Arabic as the official language of this part of the world and the major medium of communication among Arabs has similarly dented the value of English among the students. Consequently, Arab students don't realize why they should take the trouble of achieving good command over English language or why they really

need to learn English when they can use their mother tongue to achieve what they require in their life. (Arabai, 2016). Another significant issue is that students have rare opportunities of getting exposed to English outside their classrooms. Once they are outside the class, the scenario shifts completely and they get back to L1 and they tend to forget what they have learned in the class. In spite of the numerous opportunities such as, English FM Radios, English websites, newspapers etc, for them to keep in touch with English, the students rarely utilize them and continue to browse and handle their online social media activities using Arabic, their mother tongue. Though English movies are very popular among the students, they prefer to watch them with Arabic subtitles. In this case, the students' focus won't be on the conversation in the movie, rather they would concentrate on the subtitles. Consequently, not much benefit in terms of language acquisition is gained by watching movies. The absence of enough exposure to English in day today activities deters and prevents Arab students' in accomplishing a good level of English language fluency and proficiency. This absence of real life circumstances outside the classroom or the use of Arabic in their day today activities is the main difficulty that obstructs the attainment of preferred language competence in these countries because there are very minimal prospects for students to speak English. So, what happens at school is that the system of education considers English as a subject not as a language of communication. In this system, students work hard and study English with an exam oriented viewpoint. So, they don't focus on acquiring the proficiency as a skill. All these issues stand as major challenges for the students in getting command over the language especially, writing and reading.

## THE DIFFERENCE OF STRUCTURE

Both Arabic and English have got completely a different system of structure and this makes the students from the Arab countries to get confused while they learn English as they are very much used to the structure of Arabic. English and Arabic belong to different and distant language families. English belongs to the Western Germanic and Arabic belongs to the Semitic family. As a consequence the grammar of both these languages certainly differ. There are major differences in the structure and syntax of these two languages. This difference is due to many factors. One of the factors is the types of sentences in both languages. English has only verbal sentences, whereas Arabic has both nominal and verbal sentences. A nominal sentence doesn't need to have verb of any kind, it just consists of two nouns. If we look at English, a grammatically correct sentence should have a subject, a verb and an object. The sentence starts with the subject, followed by a verb and finally, it ends with the object. So, there is a clear pattern in the structure of the sentence. On the other hand, Arabic has mainly two different types of sentences, and therefore, has two different structures. (Al Muhtaseb). The first type of sentence is the verbal sentence. The pattern followed in this type is, Verb + Subject+ Object. So, as you can observe, the order is different. The only similarity is the components. The 'verb' in a verbal sentence goes before the subject, but in English, a sentence always begins with the 'subject'. The second type of Arabic sentence is the nominal sentence, which doesn't have a verb at all. This type of sentences have only two parts, a subject and a predicate. In English, these sentences have the 'be' form of the verbs, while Arabic doesn't use any type of verb. As a result, students in the Arab world tend to make mistakes in the structure of the sentences, they either write or speak in English. One of the most common errors that students make is to translate the sentences from Arabic to English in the same order or structure. For example, the phrase "a small city" would be "city small" in Arabic (*madiinah saghiirah*). Abdulla wrote a letter would be "Wrote Abdullah a letter." (*Kataba 'Ahmad risaalatan*). Although, it is a known fact that each of them has its own structure and order, students commit this mistake more often. Students have to overcome this challenge, if they have to really improve their command over English.

## ABSENCE OF SOME SOUNDS

Arabic lacks a variety of vowels and diphthongs as compared to English and stresses more on articulation than English. Glottal stops are also being used before initial vowels. Arabic has two kinds of vowels unlike English which are short vowels and long vowels. Harakat (short vowels) are basically used for instructing the students in teaching books while long vowels aids in lengthening the short vowels. In addition, they encounter many problems in learning English pronunciation particularly with not so familiar speech sounds that do not exist in their mother tongue since there are speech sounds in the Arabic language that

do not have equivalents in English language such as the (glottal stops) In contrast, there are many speech sounds in English which are not found in the Arabic language like/ p / ( pen /pen/ ) , / ɱ / ( writing / raitɱ / , / ʒ / ( pleasure / pləʒə / ) , / v / ( van / væn/ ). Therefore, due to these variances in the speech sounds of both languages, Arab students have adverse effects in the course of learning the English language and students face strain in understanding these sounds appropriately and eventually they find it difficult to write properly as well. Accordingly, mother tongue interference and absence of certain sounds in each language affect the writing and pronunciation of some English words.

## A DIFFERENT WRITING STYLE MAKES READING AND WRITING DIFFICULT

It is a known fact that Arabic is written from right to left, English appears in reverse to Arabic speakers, meaning they find books and reading texts so complicated and confusing. Adults, in particular, would find it more confusing and they may be slower in the early stages of learning English than learners who study both the languages since their early ages. Moreover, Arabic does not have upper- and lower-case letters and, although punctuation is introduced at elementary school itself as part of the writing system, it is given less consideration or focus. Therefore, it is very common to find Arabic learners mixing big and small letters within sentences and not using enough full stops and they find writing and reading English, at times, so complicated.

## CONCLUSION

It is irrefutable to say that the importance of learning English can not be ignored in today's world. The thriving opportunities offered by its knowledge propel the learners to dive deep into the ocean of knowledge. The above- mentioned problems can be solved by taking some corrective measures by the educator as well as the learner. A tutor's motivation and a student's zeal and zest offer the solution to these obstacles. However, more research in the fields of acquisition of language and learner's psychology need to be done.

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