

# Acquisition of English Language Skills by Arab Learners an Analysis of the Problems Faced

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*Abstract The paper probes the difficulties faced by Arab learners, especially from countries like Saudi Arabia, in mastering the four skills of English language namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing (LSRW). The four skills are used during first language acquisition in the order of listening, and then come speaking and later on reading and writing and these skills are required in using and comprehending any language. In this contribution a comparison has been made between the structures of both Arabic and English language, to analyse the interference of L1 on L2. Once the first language is acquired the brain is almost wired to a set of linguistic features. Such patterns interfere with the new linguistic structure of the second language. Some interference would be positive and would go unnoticed but some are negative bringing in a lot of difficulty during the new language acquisition process.*

**Key words** Comparison, language structure, Arab learners of English, English language skills, interference of L1

## I. INTRODUCTION

Arabic is one of the ancient languages that exist in the world. It's been estimated that there are more than 3 million speakers of Arabic language in the world. It is the official language of more than 26 countries; the fifth common language in the world and also one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Arabic has also enriched English language by contributing quite a few important vocabulary like zero, algebra, coffee, cotton, mattress, magazine, sugar, orange, and sofa and so on. With the increased role of Middle East in the global economy and with the growth of multinational companies, the need for learning English language among the Arabs have increased tremendously over the years. It's been estimated that in about three decades from now half of the globe would be speaking English language. Knowing English would open up many more doors of opportunities. Most of the employers prefer multilingual employees. More over knowing English language has also become a status symbol in society. With this vogue as well necessity of English language, a number of language institutes, freelance trainers, and online trainers have come up. There's a growing tendency amongst the Arabs to move on to English speaking countries either for work or studies. All these make the learning of English language absolutely necessary. But the Arab speakers face a number of problems while acquiring English language skills. This is mainly because English and Arabic belong to entirely different language family groups with very little similarities between them. Arabic belongs to a Semitic subgroup of the Afro-Asiatic group of languages and the common ancestor of all Semitic languages is called Proto-Semitic whereas English is an Indo-European language and belongs to West Germanic group of the Germanic languages.

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An Arab speaker learning how to read and write English for the first time would be going through a totally different experience.

### 1. Reading and writing skills

Reading and writing are important skills to be acquired which will facilitate the learning process of English language. They are also called artificial language skills, as not all spoken languages in the world have a written script. Reading is one of the passive skills, the other being listening. Only if the reading skill is developed can the learner read any written material. Writing is one of the difficult skills to master. It's often noticed that even students who have been learning language for a fairly long time make errors while writing. The lack of one to one correspondence between pronunciation and spelling, the different writing styles, the grammatical structure all make English quite a difficult language to master. With the growing awareness about the importance of English language in today's world, there's a rapid increase of teaching and learning of English language in schools. But majority of Arab children, keeping affluent families aside, especially in countries like Saudi Arabia, Libya and Iraq are sent to Government schools or Arabic medium schools; where in most of the cases English language is not given much importance. And later on these students realize the importance of English language when they seek admission in college, hunt for job or plan to migrate or travel to English speaking countries. They face great difficulty while facing exams like IELTS where all four skills need to be tackled. Being able to communicate fluently remains the main ambition of any language learner; the ability to read and write in a particular language remains secondary. However proficiency in these areas is required for clearing any exams. Arab speakers often make errors in written and spoken English due to the interference of their mother tongue. Since the two languages belong to different language families they differ in grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure. To understand some of the difficulties faced by the Arab learners to grasp the various skills of English language, it is imperative to understand some of the basic differences in the nature of the two languages.

#### 1.1 Vowels

A vowel is a sound that is produced by free passage of air through the larynx and oral cavity. Arabic has 6 vowels and 2 diphthongs. There are six pure vowels, short vowels /a i u/ and their corresponding long vowels /a: i: u:/ and two diphthongs. English language has around 24 vowel sounds, in the form of monothongs, diphthongs and triphthongs, which is thrice the number of vowel sounds than Arabic language. And every word in English is pronounced using the combination of any of these ten sounds as: ο: æ: ε: i:  
I: U: O: ɔ: ʌ.



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Vowels in English		Vowels in Arabic		
/i/	as in <u>feet</u>	Pronunciation	Character	Sound
/ɪ/	as in <u>sit</u>	Damma	'	U
/ɛ/	as in <u>bet</u>	Wāw	ػ	ܻ
/æ/	as in <u>apple</u>	Fatha	'	A
/u/	as in <u>soup</u>	Alif	ا	ܠ
/ʊ/	as in <u>cook</u>	Kasra	ܲ	I
/u/	as in <u>cool</u>	Ya'	݂	ܵ
/ʌ/	as in <u>up</u>			
/ə/	as in <u>butter</u>			
/ɔ/	as in <u>all</u>			
/ɑ/	as in <u>father</u>			

### Diphthongs

In English diphthongs are vowel glides where one vowel slides into another vowel

/eɪ/	as in <u>slay</u> ,
/oʊ/	as in <u>go</u>
/aɪ/	as in <u>eye</u>
/aʊ/	as in <u>cow</u>
/oɪ/	as in <u>boy</u>
/iə/	as in <u>here</u>
/eə/	as in <u>pair</u>
/uə/	as in <u>poor</u>

In Arabic, diphthongs consist of two parts, and unlike English they consist of a short vowel and a consonant. And the two diphthongs in Arabic are.

### Triphthongs

Triphthongs are glide from one vowel to another and then to another one, all rapidly. A number of words in triphthongs is present in English unlike Arabic.

ei + ə = eɪə .	as in player
aɪ + ə = aɪə.	as in fire
ɔɪ + ə = ɔɪə,	as in loyal
əʊ + ə = əʊə,	as in lower
au + ə = auə,	as in hour

The presence of so many vowels in English language is a hard hit on the Arab learners as Arabic language is mainly consonant based. The roots of Arabic words are formed with consonants. We also find that none of the Arabic words begin with a vowel sound unlike English language.

### 1.2 Consonants

Consonant sounds are produced by partial or complete closure of air stream mechanism. There are certain consonant sounds in English that does not exist in Arabic.

Arabic Consonants		English Consonants	
ا	'alif	'a' as in 'ask'	/p/ as in plate /θ/ As in <u>thing</u>
ب	Bā'	'b' as in 'book'	/b/ as in book /ð/ As in <u>father</u>
ت	Tā'	't' as in 'tall'	/t/ As in talk /s/ As in <u>sell</u>
ث	Thā'	'th' as in 'think'	/d/ As in dust /z/ As in <u>zodiac</u>



ج	Jīm	'j' as in 'jam'	/k/	As in crime	/ʃ/	As in <u>shampoo</u>
ح	Hā'	only in Arabic; a constricted English 'h'	/g/	As in great	/ʒ/	As in <u>pleasure</u>
خ	Khā'	'ch' as in German 'Bach'	/f/	As in feather	/h/	As in <u>heir</u>
د	Dāl	'd' as in 'deer' (approx.)	/v/	As in vine	/x/	As in <u>next</u>
ذ	Dhāl	'th' as in 'there'	/tʃ/	As in church	/ŋ/	As in <u>thing</u>
ر	Rā'	'r' as in 'run' (approx.)				
ز	Zāy	'z' as in 'zoo' (approx.)	/dʒ/	As in nudge	/l/	As in <u>lost</u>
س	Sīn	's' as in 'sit'	/m/	As in mill	/r/	As in <u>red</u>
ش	Shīn	'sh' as in 'shut'	/n/	As in nest	/v/	As in <u>yan</u>
ص	Şād	the counterpart of Sīn; all the 'emphatics' are pronounced with the back of the tongue slightly raised			/j/	As in <u>yellow</u>
ض	Dād	the counterpart of Dāl				
ط	Tā'	the counterpart of Tā'				
ظ	Zā'	the counterpart of Dhāl				
ع	‘ayn	purely Arabic -- a constriction of the throat and an expulsion of the breath with the vocal cords vibrating				
غ	Ghayn	close to a French 'r' as in 'Paris'				
ف	Fā'	'f' as in 'free'				
ق	Qāf	'k' in the back of the throat; compare 'cough' with 'calf'				
ك	Kāf	'k' as in 'king'				
ل	Lām	'T' as in 'lift'				
م	Mīm	'm' as in 'moon'				
ن	Nūn	'n' as in 'net'				
ه	Hā'	'h' as in 'house'				
و	Wāw	'w' as in 'wonder'				
ي	Yā'	'y' as in 'yellow'				
ء	Hamza	not a p				

In English, consonant sounds are described under the three term label: place of articulation, manner of articulation and voicing. There are 24 consonants sounds in English, six stops, nine fricatives, two affricates, three nasals, two glides, and two liquids. Whereas there are 28 consonants in Arabic,

eight stops, thirteen fricatives, one affricate, two nasals, two liquids and two glide.



### 1.3 Consonant cluster

Consonant clusters are group of consonant sounds with no vowels in between. There are considerable differences in the consonant cluster system between the two languages. Arabic has only two consonant clusters found either in the middle or end of a word. But English has more than two up to seven consonant clusters. This causes problems in pronunciation as consonant sounds in Arabic are followed by vowels, so they tend to do the same with English. Every single consonant is followed by vowel. Hence the beginners tend to pronounce the word 'school' as sichool, 'next' as nexit, 'split' as sipilitand so on.

### 1.4 Script

English uses a script with 26 alphabets which reduces the 44 sounds while Arabic uses Abjad where all short vowels are

unimportant or indeed they are omitted in writing, leaving it to the readers to insert them wherever necessary. Arabic has 28 consonants and 8 vowels or diphthongs that reduce fifty one sounds and the script is written and read from right to left unlike English which is written and read from left to right. Hence the process of learning English language for Arabs means learning to read and write all over again. Moreover the use of uppercase and lowercase letters does not exist in Arabic and also the rules related to the use of punctuations are much loose. These basic differences in the writing system cause a lot of hassles for Arab learners and they would take more time to learn how to read and write than those learners whose first language belong to Indo European language family.

English Alphabets						
A	B	C	D	E	F	G
H	I	J	K	L	M	N
O	P	Q	R	S	T	U
V	W	X	Y	Z		

  

Arabic Alphabets						
خ	ح	ج	ث	ت	ب	ا
ḥā' / khā'	ḥā'	Jīm	tā' / tha'	tā'	bā'	'alif
ص	ش	س	ز	ر	ذ	د
ṣād	šīn / shīn	Sīn	zāy/zayn	rā'	dāl / dhāl	Dāl
ق	ف	غ	ع	ظ	ط	ض
qāf	fā'	ǵayn / ghayn	'ayn	zā'	ṭā'	ḍād
ڙ	و	ه	ن	م	ل	ك
yā'	Wāw	hā'	nūn	mīm	Lām	Kāf

A few phrases in Arabic to get a feel of the language

How are you? - حالك؟ كيف - (Khaifalaluk?)

Where are you? - أين؟ أين - (Ainainthi?)

I am sorry. - آسفانـا - (Ana asif)

I am pleased to meet you. - بـلـغـاتـكـسعـدـتـ - (thasharaafnaikum)

See you soon. - قـرـيـبـاـالـلـقاءـإـلـىـ. (ithalikakaliban)

However Arabic numbers unlike script is written from right to left



١٢	ithna 'ashar	12
٢٣	thalathawa-'ishrun	23
٨٦	sittawa-thamanun	86
١٠٠	mi'a	100
٢٠٠	Alfain	200

#### **1.4 Vocabulary**

English language has over a million words which makes it quite a massive language and this can also be daunting for new learners. We find that Arabic is pronounced in the same way it is written, however English does not comply with this rule. It might not be written as the way it is pronounced, it has words with same pronunciation but different meaning, and it even has same word with different meaning and so onFor e.g. Desert as in abandon and desert as in a vast dry place.Buy/ byWhere/wereWeak /week Weather/whether Wait/weightAll this makes English quiet a difficult one to master and causes spelling difficulties too. One of the main reasons where new learners take a back seat when it comes to writing and proper communication is the lack of vocabulary.

#### **1.5 Grammar**

Grammar presents a huge challenge for Arab learners of English language simply because Arabic and English operate in entirely different ways. An analysis of the grammatical differences between the structures of two languages would provide a fruitful insight into the various errors that the learners make in the process of learning English language.

#### **1.6 Word order**

Word order is an obstacle that stands in the way of a language learner. A word order can be defined as the syntactic arrangement of words in a phrase, clause or sentence. In other words it's the arrangement of words in to sentences. Often it's very difficult in comprehending and mastering a different word order. English follows just one word order that SVO.

Subject Verb Object  
Cat Killed the rat

Any change in the order can lead to change in the meaning or grammatical error.But in Arabic there are different types of sentences but the main ones are nominal sentences and verbal sentences. In Nominal sentences there are no verbs at all. In English we cannot think of a sentence without a verb. And the other type of sentence is Verbal sentence, the word order would be VSO.So the above sentence would be something like:Verb SubjectObjectKilled cat the ratIt's often found that students often forget that each language has its own word orders and they still would literally translate sentences from their language leading to errors in the sentence structure.

#### **1.6 Root system**

In Arabic all common nouns, adjectives and verbs are formed by three root letters or trilateral. Arabic has a unique way of producing sounds from basic roots.For e.g. Salaam-Islam-Muslim

In these three words we can find that S-L-M occurs in the same order. These combination of letters are called root. Root S-L-M conveys peace. Salaam means peace, Islam means submission and muslim means a person submitted to the will of God. Similarly words like Kitaab(book)-Kaatib(writer)-Maktab(office)-Makataba(library)Here the root is K-T-B which means anything related to writing. The fundamental concept of Arabic language is encoded into this simple three letter combination. There are four letter roots too which is quite rare. An understanding of the root words will enable a better understanding of the meaning of derivative words. Hence Arabic has a pattern which can be adopted. But such a root word system or pattern is not used in English language. Lack of such a pattern in English language to distinguish nouns from verbs or adjectives often confuses the Arab learners.

#### **1.7 Use of the verb 'to be' and present perfect**

Verb' to be' is an important part in English language while the case is not the same in Arabic. The usage of verb is perhaps one of the first lessons of grammar which are being taught in English. In fact predicate part of a sentence is tied to a verb form and a speaker of English language cannot think of a language without these restriction.But Semitic languages do not have these restrictions. A sentence predicate can be a noun or adjective which is called nominal sentence.Arabs make errors in sentence construction due to the looseness of its usage in their language.

For e.g.1. She is very pretty.

She very pretty.

2. He is honest

He honest

Arab learners would take some time to understand why the second sentence is not correct in English. Verb conjugation in the simple present tense such as 'am' 'is' and 'are' are not there in Arabic. In other words Arabic does not use 'verb to be' as an important element of syntax. It is usually to describe past events and not necessarily about things happening at present Moreover present perfect also cause errors in their sentence construction like using them to denote things that happened in the past. For e.g. I have written the letter yesterday

#### **1.8 Gender**

The manner in which gender is indicated in Arabic is clear unlike English. In English we have masculine, feminine and neutral gender and many a times a common structure is used for masculine and feminine nouns. But Arabic has separate structure for almost all masculine and feminine nouns. Even verbs and adjectives change with the change in gender. So also common nouns change according to the change in gender for egMuhandis(Male engineer) and Muhandisa (Female engineer), Mudaris(Male teacher) and Mudarisa (female teacher) whereas in English language we don't find such changes.



Place of articulation	English	Arabic
Bilabials	/p/ /b/ /m/ /w/	/b/ /m/ /w/
Labio dental	/f/ /v/	/f/
Dental sounds	/ð// θ/	/ð// θ/
Alveolar	/t/ /d/ /s/ /z/ /n/ /l/ /r/	/r/ /l/ /n/
Palatoalveolar	/ʃ/ /ʒ/ /tʃ// d ʒ/	/ʃ/ /ʒ/ /j/
Velars	/k/ /g/ /ŋ/	/kh/ /gh/
Palatal	/j/	/ʃ/ /j/ /ʒ/
Glottal	/h/	? ↗ (hamza)

### 1.9 Articles

Correct use of articles is an important element in English grammar. Indefinite article 'a' and 'an' and definite article 'the' brings in meaning to sentences whereas Arabic doesn't have an equivalent to 'a' and 'an'. There is a usage of 'Al' which is equivalent to 'the' attached at the beginning of a word like Al-marwaha - the fan.

## II. SPEAKING AND LISTENING SKILLS

Speaking, one of the productive skills, the other being writing, is considered to be one of the most difficult skills to master for English language learners. Being able to speak fluently is the ultimate aim of majority of learners. As far as Arab learners are concerned especially in Saudi Arabia there's very little opportunity for natural interaction outside, though expatriates occupy huge number in population there, majority of expatriates know Arabic language as part of their survival and unlike many Asian countries like India which use English language in public spaces like a hotel or hospital reception or airports, Arab countries like Saudi Arabia hardly use English to communicate in public domain. In other words Arabic is the lingua franca here. So the only source of using English language for Arab natives is the language classroom. Apart from not getting exposed to English language often a close scrutiny will show what causes difficulties for the Arab learner in mastering speaking and listening skills. There are certain sounds that

the speakers generally struggle with. Arabic speakers often rely on epiglottis. This area of the larynx is not usually used while producing English sounds. Hence the learners speak English with a heavy Arabic accent. This phenomenon or mothertongue influence is often seen among Arabs who are good at English language too.

### 2.1 Points of articulation

Point or the place of articulation refers to the point in which the articulators come into contact during the production of sounds. An analysis of the sound system of both languages

There are certain sounds in English that do not exist in Arabic. So the Arab learners often relate these sounds to the closest sounds in their language. For e.g. sounds / p/ /v/ /g/ don't exist in Arabic so the beginners relate it to the consonants sounds /b/ /f/ /j/ respectively. Hence we find that a beginner Arab learner might find it difficult to pronounce 'pen' 'pill' and would say it as 'ben' and 'bill'-Standard Arabic doesn't have the labio dental sound /v/, hence instead of 'very' beginners pronounce it as 'fery'-In English dental sounds are produced when the tip of the tongue touches the upper front teeth whereas Arabic inter dental sounds are produced when the tongue is between the upper and lower teeth. So the sounds are articulated quiet



differently.-Alveolar sounds pose difficulty for Arab learners of English as they are dental sounds in Arabic. Thus we find students pronouncing the word /so/ differently. Alveolar sounds in Arabic are /r/ /l/ /n/ however instead of pronouncing /rat/ with a flat /r/ they might pronounce it with a trill /r/ thereby over pronouncing the sound/r/. Thus alveolar sounds can be quite confusing for the Arab learners.- The absence of Palatalalveolar sounds like/tʃ// dʒ/ in Arabic causes difficulty in pronouncing certain words that begins with these sounds. So we find Arabs learners pronounce words like ‘chip’ as ‘Ship’ causing much difficulty to the listeners in comprehending them.-Velar sounds in English are produced using the back of the tongue and the soft palate whereas velar sounds in Arabic is produced with the back of the tongue against the velum. For e.g. The surname ‘khan’. This sound is absent in English and this is one of the sounds that creates heavy Arabic accent in English because there is a tendency among Arab learners to use this sound even in words like ‘camel’-Palatal sounds are produced with the front of the tongue and the hard palate. English has only one palatal sound /j/, whereas palatal sounds in Arabic are /ʃ/ /j/ /ʒ/. This again cause difficulty as /ʃ/ /ʒ/ are palatoalveolar sounds in English.- Another area of difficulty is the pronunciation of the sound /h/. It is found that the sound is over pronounced. These differences in the points of articulation of sounds between the two languages cause considerable confusion among the beginners. Also these differences result in heavy accent among Arab learners which make it difficult for listeners to comprehend. Very often it’s been noticed that the students lack communication skills in real context. They do not possess appropriate vocabulary to carry out real conversation.

## **2.2 Elision**

Elision or deletion is the omission of one or more sounds such as a vowel, a consonant or a whole syllable in a word or a phrase. This omission of sounds is often problematic to Arab learners that they find it difficult to comprehend as well as articulate. For e.g. “jew you know him”? for “Do you know him?” would be difficult for the Arab learners to grasp.

## **2.3 Stress and intonation**

English is a stress timed language with features of rhythm such as pitch, stress and intonation. Or else the language would sound flat, monotone, and boring. To communicate clearly in English it’s imperative to stress on the right syllable. This is an additional challenge for Arab learners. The random stress pattern in English language poses difficulty for Arab learners. For e.g. ‘Present’ as a noun, stress is on the first syllable where as ‘present’ as a verb, the stress is on the second syllable.

PRESent  
present

## **III. CONCLUSION**

It can be concluded that the Arab learners face difficulty in comprehending and implementing the new grammatical structure, lack of proper vocabulary, problems in pronunciation and lack of confidence in using the language. English being a tricky language, its various skills and minute nuances can be mastered only through constant practice. There is a plethora of difference between both

languages because they belong to different family groups and as a result they work in different ways. It’s very normal for anyone who learns a second language, to translate the new language from their mother tongue. The base would always be L1. In this case Arab learners tend to think in their language and translate it to English. But to gain mastery over the new language certain things need to be taken into consideration. The main requirement is the awareness regarding L1 interference in the process of acquiring the skills of a second language like English language, and a conscious effort to eradicate the influence of L1.

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