

## The Difficulties of Teaching and Learning Arabic as a Second Language

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### Abstract

Learning a foreign language is not easy. This study aims to identify the difficulties of learning Arabic faced by foreign students. The study attempts to answer some questions about the attitudes of the non-native learners toward learning Arabic language, as well as the difficulties that the non-native learners face in learning Arabic and the reasons that cause these difficulties. To achieve the goals of the study, the present study interpreted the results of both students' and teachers' questionnaires. The examined sample includes 100 students enrolled at private school in Sharjah (UAE). The results of the study show that the non-native learners of Arabic have positive attitudes towards Arabic culture. Furthermore, the results reveal that there are different difficulties to learn Arabic for non-Arab learner. There are also many reasons related to the language itself, curriculum and students environment. This study exemplifies how both students and teachers consider speaking and writing as the most difficult skills for non-Arabs.

**Keywords:** language, Arabic as a second language, second language acquisition.

### Introduction

Languages play an important role in our daily lives and in the development of personality. It is an essential way of communication. A language is a system of arbitrary, vocal symbols that permit all people in a given culture or other people who have learned the system of that culture, to communicate or to interact (Finocchiaro, in Ramelan 1984). Knowledge of foreign languages helps us understand and value cultural differences. Arabic language is one of the most spoken languages in the world. It affects most people in some aspects such as religion, international relationship, educational career or job career. Arabs are very proud of their language since Quran, the holy book of Muslims and the main reference of Islam is written in Arabic language. Arabic language is the key to understand Islam and the holy Quran. Some people learn Arabic as they think that it plays a significant role in international relationship, so traveling to the Arab countries would be easier when they understand Arabic. Moreover, Learning Arabic is a way to learn the culture of the country where the language is spoken. Learning Arabic helps people understand Islam better.

## Review of Literature

This part is a survey of related literature. It is an attempt to shed light on some studies related to the role of Arabic language in Arab countries and other parts of the world. The aim is to enhance the readers' background knowledge about the role of Arabic language.

In his study, Sayyed, F (2015) states that Arabic is the official language of the 22 countries that form the Arab League. There are more than 300 million Arabic speakers across the world. It is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations (UN).

In their study of the role of Arabic language as a case study, Zedan *et al* (2013) states that language has many styles and ways of presenting feelings, ideas, and meaning. They declared that Arabic language became once in the history a key of success for education during Islamic civilization; hence it was an honor for students across the world to study Arabic language and to continue their education in Arabic.

More related to the present study, Chijne (1969) mentions that Arabic has played an important role in the history. It is one of the most common languages in the world.

Moreover, Coffman (1995) states that Arabic is far more than a language; rather, the language of Islam, the language chosen by God to speak to mankind, influences how a person perceives the world and expresses reality.

In his study about Arabic Language, Ahmad (2010) declared that the Arabic language plays a vital role in Muslim's life since they are using Arabic language in five daily prayers.

In summary, this study has reviewed some literature related to the issue of the role of Arabic. The role of Arabic in general was discussed by many researchers from different parts of the world. Based on this review, the researcher has arrived at the following conclusions. Firstly, Arabic has played an important role in the history. It is the key to understand Arab culture.

## Methodology

In this study, the researcher describes the methods used to collect the data necessary for the purpose of the study. Moreover, the sample of the study is defined. After that, the tools used in collecting data and the ways in which they were analyzed are explained.

The sample of the study was chosen from private schools in UAE. Due to the difficulty of gathering a large number of students, 100 students were chosen. Moreover, 50 teachers for non-Arabs students who work in UAE were asked about their attitudes towards their student's level.

## Statement of the Problem

Teaching Arabic to speakers of other languages has become a wide field that attracts students from all over the world to learn Arabic. The teaching of Arabic to non-Arabs is a difficult task. There are a lot of problems in teaching Arabic to non-Arabs in UAE, so the researcher decided to examine these difficulties and their reasons.

## Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the difficulties of learning and teaching Arabic as a second language. The study aims at investigating the learners' attitudes towards Arabic culture; investigating the difficulties and the reasons that the non-native learners face in learning Arabic from teachers and students point of view in UAE. In the process, the study tries to find some solutions to the problems of learning and teaching Arabic as a second language.

## Questions of the Study

To achieve the objectives, the study attempted to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the attitudes of the non-Arab learners' of Arabic towards Arabic culture?
- 2- What are the difficulties that the non-Arab learners face in learning Arabic in UAE from students and teachers point of view?
- 3- What are the most difficult skills for non- Arabs learner in UAE?
- 3- What are the reasons that cause these difficulties from students and teachers point of view?

## Limitations of the Study

The results cannot be generalized to all non-native learners of Arabic in UAE. The study is limited to the sample and instruments adopted in this study. This study was conducted in Sharjah during the academic year 2019-2020.

### **Data collection**

To obtain data necessary for the purpose of the study, the researcher collected data from a private school in Sharjah, UAE. This school was chosen because it has a large number of non-Arab students and hence it has a different variety of nationalities. Based on the selected sample, a questionnaire was designed in order to investigate the attitudes of the non-Arab learners' of Arabic towards Arabic language. It was written in English to guarantee full comprehension by respondents. It was divided into two parts. The first one asks for personal information about the subjects: gender, nationality, religion and the first language. The second part of the questionnaire consists of (5) items which include attitudes towards Arabic language in general, the reasons for studying Arabic language and the difficulties of Arabic language in their point of view. Another questionnaire was designed in order to investigate the teacher's opinion about the students' level and the difficulties when they teach Arabic. The questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 100 students. The subjects were told about the nature of this research and assured that the data would be used only for academic purposes. Subjects were both male and female of different ages.

### **Data analysis**

To analyze the collected data, the questionnaire showed the tendencies of non-Arabs towards Arabic language, the reasons for studying Arabic language, the most difficult skill for learners and the difficulty of learning Arabic as a second language.

After the questionnaires were distributed, completed and returned, the responses were coded, and frequencies and percentages were calculated. Percentages were used to determine which skills were more difficult than others and reasons for the difficulty of learning Arabic for non-Arabs.

### **Results and Discussion of the Study**

This study presents the findings of the study starting with answering the questions of the study which investigate the learners' attitudes toward Arabic culture and the difficulties that non-native learners of Arabic encounter. The study questions and their results are presented below and calculated in percentages.

*Students attitude toward Arabic language:*

Based on the sample and the students' responses, it is noticed that 63% of the sample were females while 37% were males. The students were from Pakistan, India, German, Srilanka, Britain and Bangladesh. It is shown that the majority of the learners have positive attitudes toward Arabic culture. Based on the results it is noticed that 85% of the sample like Arabic language. It is also noticed that 48% of the sample assumed that Arabic language is interesting while 31% assumed that it is difficult and 21% assumed that Arabic is easy to learn.

Name Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1- interesting	60	48%
2- difficult	38	31%
3- easy	26	21%
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table (1) Students' attitude toward Arabic language.**

*Students reasons and motivation to learn Arabic:*

The results of this study show that variety of motivations can play an important role in a student's decision to learn Arabic. It is noticed that some students are interested in Arabic culture with 29%. Religious reasons are also one reason with 26%. It is also noticed that some students learn Arabic as required material with 18%. Others learn the language to find a job with 5% while non-identified other reasons constitute 22%.

Name Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1- interested in Arabic language	37	29%
2- Religious purposes	34	26%
3- required	23	18%
4- find a job	7	5%
5- other reasons	29	22%
<b>Total</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table (3) Students reasons and motivation to learn Arabic**

*Students attitude toward the most difficult skill to learn:*

Based on the sample and the students' responses, it is noticed that speaking is the most difficult skill for non Arabs learner with 42% followed by writing with 26%, then reading with 17% and finally listening with 15%.

Name Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1- Speaking	70	42%
2- Writing	44	26%
3- Reading	28	17%
4- Listening	25	15%
<b>Total</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table (2) Students' attitude toward the most difficult skill to learn.**

### Students opinions toward the reasons of difficulties of learning Arabic:

The following table shows the percentages of difficulties for non-Arabs when they learn Arabic.

Name Category	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
1- Difficulty in using Modern Standard Arabic	72%	28%
2- Difficulty in guessing the meaning of words when they are in isolation	70%	30%
3- Difficulty of learning Arabic grammar	61%	39%
4- Difficulty in pronouncing some Arabic sounds properly	65%	35%
5- Difficulty in using standard Arabic without translation	54%	46%
6- Difficulties in understanding new text	77%	23%
7- Difficulties in using masculine and feminine, singular and plural properly	54%	46%
8- Difficulties in expressing my thoughts in Arabic	70%	30%

**Table (4) Students' opinions toward the of difficulties learning Arabic**

The results which appear in table above illustrate that the majority of the non-native learners of Arabic find difficulty to use modern standard Arabic grammar with 72%. Al-Batal (1992) found that most students who learn Modern Standard Arabic get easily discouraged and frustrated because they do not have the ability to use the language in daily communication. These difficulties are due to the fact that students learn modern standard Arabic while Arab people speak non-standard dialect, so students can't understand.

A large number of learners encounter high difficulty in understanding the meaning of words when they are not in their context with 70% because they are not used in their context.

The majority of students with 61% find difficulty to use Arabic grammar correctly since some teachers show Arabic grammar in isolation without context. There are many reasons for students' weakness in learning Arabic grammar. One of these essential reasons is learning grammar as a separate subject and marginalizing the sense of language by the side of teachers. Teaching Arabic grammar should have a specific goal. It should further be integrated to other four language skills. In addition, it better suit the varied levels of students and take in consideration the gradient process of teaching grammar from the easy parts to the harder ones.

Pronouncing Arabic sounds properly is also one problem for non-Arab learners with 65% because some sounds in Arabic are not exist in student's language. Some students find difficulty because there is no translation when they learn Arabic with 54%.

It is shown that 70% of non-Arab learners can't express their thoughts in Arabic because 54% of them find difficulty to differentiate between singular and plural and masculine and feminine. It is also shown that 77% of non-Arab learners find difficulty in understanding new text. The following table shows percentages of reasons of difficulties that non Arabsface when they learn Arabic.

Name Category	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
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1- The difference between my culture and Arabic culture	51%	49%
2- Different shapes of letter in Arabic	43%	57%
3- Some sounds in Arabic are not exist in my language.	58%	42%
4- Dealing with teachers strategies	38%	62%
5- Textbook materials do not provide enough exercises	75%	25%
6- My environment (home, friends) are not motivated to learn Arabic	58%	42%
7- I use Arabic in school only	60%	40%

**Table (5) Students opinions toward the reasons of difficulties learning Arabic**

The results which appear in table above illustrate the reasons of the difficulty of Arabic language. It seems that some of the difficulties and challenges are likely to be due to specific features of Arabic language itself, some related to the teachers, some related to the curriculum and others related to the students' environment. It is obvious that 51% assumed that the difference between student's culture and Arabic culture is one of the difficulties to understand Arabic. Many researchers in the TAFL field, like Al-Batal, 1988 have emphasized that cultural competence is one of the important factors of language competence. He found that students with knowledge of these important aspects of Arabic culture were more able to get involved with people and more confident in using the environment surrounding them. 43% of students find difficulty to differentiate between shapes of letters since letters in Arabic have different shapes. The students find difficulties to identify different shapes of Arabic letters. Every letter has four different forms: isolated, initial, medial and final for example, (ب, ـب, ـب, ـب). The majority of the letters have multiple shapes and they contribute to the difficulty in learning Arabic language.

The results of this study signify that 58% related to some sounds in Arabic that do not exist in student's language. Arabic differs from other languages in many ways. One of the most differences is the way in which some Arabic sounds are pronounced. Theses sounds are /ح.ħ/ (ħulm / حلم "dream")- /خ.ħ/ (ħal / خَل "vinegar")- /ص.s/ (ṣabr/ صَبْر "patience")- /ض.d/ (ḍamān / ضَمَان "warranty")- /ط.t/ (maṭar / مَطَر "rain")- /ظ.zā/ (zaḷām / ظَلَام "darkness")- /ع.ʕ/ (Ammān / عَمَّان)- /غ.g/ (ḡasala / غَسَلَ "He washed")- /ق.q/ (qāl / قَالَ "he said")

This difficulty mainly results from the fact that there is no equivalent to some of these sounds in English and most other languages. Furthermore, the [strategies](#) that teachers use entail a critical impact on language learning. 38% of students face some difficulties to deal with teachers and their strategies while 62% of students don't. Some students don't meet their needs in materials. 75% of them find difficulty to deal with the textbooks. A lot of books focus on specific skills like reading and writing and ignore speaking and listening. Student's learning environment has an impact on their motivation. It is also one reason for the difficulty of learning Arabic with 58% since they don't use Arabic at home while 60% use Arabic in school only. They need support and practice at home to learn Arabic language.

*Teachers teaching approaches with their students:*

Based on the teachers' point of view toward the difficulty of Arabic language when they teach for non-Arabs, it is noticed that 75% of the teachers assumed that Arabic language is difficult for students to learn while 25% assumed that it is interesting to learn for non-Arabs.

Based on the teachers' responses considering their students learning process, it is noticed that the majority of students learn Arabic language for religious purposes with 38%. Some teachers agree that students learn Arabic as required material with 33% while some learners are interested in Arabic culture with 29%.

There are many difficulties that correspond to non-native speakers such as speaking and writing skills which are important in learning the language. Based on the sample and the teachers' responses, it is noticed that speaking is the most difficult skill for non-Arabic learner with 59% followed by writing with 29%, then listening with 7% and finally reading with 5%.

To start with reading skills, the majority of students can determine the main ideas of the topic with 80%. They can determine the topic of the text easily with 77%. It is shown that students can guess the title of the text with 92%. Besides, 70% of students can understand the meaning of new words.

Name Category	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
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1- Students can identify the main ideas of the topic	80%	20%
2- Students can identify the topic of the text	77%	23%
3- Students can put title for the text.	92%	8%
4- Students can understand the meaning of new words	70%	30%
5- Students can differentiate between main and secondary ideas	15%	85%

**Table (6) Teachers attitudes toward reading skill**

Writing is a difficult skill for non-Arab learners. 85% of students find difficulty to use conjunction when they write Arabic paragraphs. The majority of students can use Arabic grammar correctly with 62%. Some of them can't use punctuation marks correctly with 77% when they write. The majority of students can't arrange ideas between paragraphs with 62%. There are some reasons for the weakness in writing such as students have inability to write some characters in writing correctly since some letters have different shapes in initial and middle.

Name Category	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
1- Students can write grammatical sentences	62%	38%
2- Students use conjunction marks correctly	15%	85%
3- Students use punctuation marks correctly	23%	77%
4- Students can arrange ideas between paragraphs	38%	62%

**Table (7) Teachers attitudes toward writing skill**

Listening is another skill to learn for non-Arabs. The majority of Students can't understand the listening lesson from first time with 85%. They find difficulty to answer the questions after the listening lesson with 92%. The positive side is that students can understand the meaning of the words in listening is 80%. These difficulties are due to the fact that that students lack vocabularies and structure in Arabic and they can't connect between the words they listened and the words they know.

Name Category	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
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1- Students can understand the listening lesson	46%	54%
2- Students can answer the question after listening lesson easily	92%	8%
3- Students can understand the meaning of the words in listening	80%	20%
4- Students can understand the listening lesson from first time	15%	85%

**Table (8) Teachers' attitudes toward listening skill**

Speaking constitutes the largest percentage as the most difficult skill for non-Arabs with 59%. The majority of students can't pronounce Arabic sounds correctly with 70%. Using body language is the important part in speaking, 62% can't use body language correctly in speaking. Time management constitutes 53% in speaking, some students take a lot of time when they express their ideas.

Name Category	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
1- Students can use Arabic structure correctly	70%	30%
2- Students can pronounce sounds correctly	30%	70%
4- Students can use body language correctly	38%	62%
5- Time management when they talk	53%	47%

**Table (9) Teachers attitudes toward speaking skill**

## Conclusions

Arabic is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. It is absolutely a global language. Arabic is the language of Islam, the language of the Quran, studied and spoken by Muslims across the world. Learning Arabic offers the chance to gain a bit of knowledge about one of the world's major religions. Studying Arabic provides learners about Islamic beliefs and traditions. This study explored the difficulties of learning and teaching Arabic as a second language. The study also investigated the learners' attitudes towards Arabic culture. Moreover, it is investigated the difficulties and the reasons that the non-native learners face when learning Arabic.

An analysis of the overall results of the study indicated that generally the non-Arabs learners of Arabic had positive attitudes and feelings towards Arabic culture. Based on the results it is noticed that 85% of the sample like Arabic language. It is also noticed that 48% of the sample assumed that Arabic language is interesting to learn.

It is noticed that speaking is the most difficult skill for non-Arabs learner with 42% followed by writing with 26%, then reading with 17% and finally listening with 15%.

Moreover, the results convey that the non-native encountered different difficulties in learning Arabic. The results also highlighted the reasons of these difficulties like difficulty in using Modern Standard Arabic grammar with the native speakers of Arabic, difficulty in understanding the meaning of words when they are not in their context and others. It was clear that both teachers and learners agreed that speaking and writing are the most difficult Arabic skills for non-Arabs learners. The reasons for these difficulties related to some factors like the nature of Arabic language, teacher's strategies and curriculum.

## Suggestions and Recommendations

Generally, learning and teaching Arabic for non-Arabs is not an easy task. The researcher finds out that learning and teaching Arabic acquire distinguished efforts. There is an urgent need to do hard to develop teachers and their strategies and to find materials that cover what students need.

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