Challenges Faced by Female Saudi Students of Burydah Private Colleges in Learning English and Resolutions

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Abstract:

(English has become a global and powerful language, and is now the second language of many countries, including those in the Middle East. As a result of this progression, people living in Arab nations have made an effort to learn and acquire the language. However, there are linguistic, cultural, educational, political, and personal challenges that Arab students face when learning English. Scholars have found that Arabs usually encounter problems and challenges in the process of learning the English language, such as in grammar, pronunciation, writing, reading, and communication.

The focus of this extensive literature review is on the challenges that female Saudi students of Burydah Private Colleges encounter in learning English and possible resolutions. After the review of the literature, recommendations will be provided for helping teachers overcome obstacles.

Keywords: English language, Arabic, dialects, difference, gender, complicated, and complex

History of the Arabic Language

The Arabic language belongs to the Semitic language family which includes Hebrew, Aramaic, Maltese, Amharic, Tigrinya, Tigre, Gurage, Geez, Syrica, Akkadian, Phonoecian, Punic, Ugaritic, Nabatean, Amorite and Moabite. Its grammar is very different from that found in English. Most of these languages are now considered "dead," but in contrast, Arabic has flourished because of the rise of Islam and, more specifically, Islam's holy book, the *Quran*. Over 250 million people in the Middle East speak the Arabic language. Furthermore, the world's one billion Muslims use Arabic as a religious language. There are two forms of Arabic: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Colloquial Arabic (CA). Modern Standard Arabic is the official language of the Arabic world, while CA refers to Arabic that is spoken with a dialect, of which there are more than 30 different forms. Some of the most common dialects are Egyptian Arabic, Algerian Arabic, Sudanese Arabic, and North Levantine Arabic. However, every Arab country has its own colloquial form of Arabic, and some dialects can be so strong that although people are speaking the same language, it is hard to communicate, such as in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. In this situation, Arabic speakers tend to use the MSA heard on TV and in films, plays, poetry, and books.

Arabic Alphabet

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ا	ب	ت	ث	ج	ح	خ
âlif	bâ	tâ	thâ	djim	há	rró
د	ذ	ر	ز	س	ش	ص
dâl	dhâl	rá	zái	sin	shin	sód
ض	ط	ظ	ع	غ	ف	ق
dód	tó	dá	áin	gháin	fâ	qóf
ك	ل	م	ن	ه	و	ي
kâ	lâm	mim	nun	hâ	uau	iâ

Differences Between Arabic and English Languages

There are numerous differences between English and Arabic grammar because the languages originate from two distinct language families. For example, English has 24 consonant phonemes and 5 vowels, while Arabic has 28 consonant phonemes and 8 vowel phonemes. Words in Arabic are read and written from right to left and written in cursive script, unlike the English language's left to right tradition. Letters in Arabic change form according to their appearance whether at the beginning, middle, or end of a word, and while some of the Arabic letters look similar, they are distinguished from one another by the presence of dots above or below their central part. For example, the Arabic letters of *b* and *th* have the same basic shape, but *b* has one dot below, ب, and *th* has three dots above, ث.

Moreover, the letters *p, v, x, ch,* and *g* do not exist in Arabic; Arabs pronounce *p* as *b* and *v* as *f*. Similarly, some sounds of Arabic letters are not found in English, such as ح خ ص ض ط ظ ق ع غ. In addition, Arabic numbers are written from left to right – for example, ٦٧٨ is 678 – not as in the English numbers, which are in the same direction of the alphabet. The gender in Arabic can be feminine and masculine, as with English; however, in English the feminine and masculine structures are the same, but Arabic has separate structures for each. Even verbs and adjectives change with the change in subject gender. English uses *a* and *an* for indefinite nouns and *the* for definite nouns, while Arabic uses *Al* at the beginning of the word, for example, *Al-bab* (the door).

English and Arabic have some similarities and differences in pronouns. All subject pronouns (he, she, they, we, and I) are words separate from nouns or verbs in both languages. However, in Arabic the subject pronouns are frequently dropped or used for emphasis. Object and possessive pronouns (me, you, us, them, him, her, his, her, yours, mine, etc.) are detached in English, but in Arabic these are attached to verbs and prepositions, and possessive pronouns attached to nouns. Furthermore, in Arabic the relative pronouns (who, whom, whose, that, and which) change in line with the gender, while the English language uses the same relative pronouns in masculine and feminine examples. According to Abdullah (2012), the English language is taught with the present tense verb, and then followed by past and future tenses. Meanwhile, Arabic is taught with the past tense verb, and then followed by present and future tenses. In addition, Arabic verbs change according to the subject person and gender, and the passive voice is not as common in Arabic as in English.

Moreover, English adjectives are followed by nouns, while in Arabic nouns are followed by adjectives. The adjectives in the Arabic language change according to gender, or whether they are singular or plural nouns. However, English uses the same adjectives for women and men, and for plural and singular nouns. Furthermore, the sentence order in Arabic is verb-subject-object; in English it is subject-verb-object. The above information represents some of the most important similarities and differences between the two languages.

Writing Problems

Adas and Bakir (2013) discovered that writing is a complicated and complex task to teach and study, and it is the most difficult of all the language abilities to acquire. It was observed that Teaching English writing to the learners provides many challenges. due to the differences between the two languages, and therefore many experts have sought to improve the processes of learning English for Arab students. Adas and Bakir (2013) state that "it is a very tough mission for teachers to teach English creatively so that students could become independent learners and benefit a lot from the innovative teaching techniques adopted by the teacher" (p. 254).

First, the main cause of the learners' weakness in Burydah Private Colleges in English involves the teaching method and the environment. Lack of student motivation or a lack of teacher interest is the most important cause. Second, the issue of using Arabic in English classes has both positive and negative connotations. I attended a conference at Edgewood College and learned that it is important to translate the difficult L2 words to L1 for learners during the class, as this helps the students understand the lesson and to maintain focus and interaction with the teacher. This could be valuable to apply in my country because in Saudi Arabia the English teachers cannot speak any Arabic during the class. The negative side to this method is if the teachers use L1 excessively during the class, this will clearly not help the students to acquire L2. The third problem to note is that the students write in Arabic and then translate the whole passage to

English. Finally, teachers often have low English proficiency because most of them graduated from Arabic universities and were taught by Arabic teachers.

Furthermore, using the articles *a, an,* and *the* represents a major challenge for learners of English writing. The ESL Department Blog (2012) states that "in Arabic the indefinite article does not exist leading to its omission when English requires it. There is a definite article but its use is not identical with the use of the definite article in English. In particular, learners have problems with genitive constructions such as the boy's dog. In Arabic this would be expressed as Dog the boy, which is how such constructions may be conveyed into English" (para. 18). The causing of this kind of mistake is because of the differences between articles in Arabic and English. The Arabic language does not have an indefinite article so that causing its omission when English require it.

In addition, four common and significant mistakes the learners make while writing because of the effect of their first language. The first is the use of run-on sentences; we have noticed that our students write endless sentences with no periods and many commas because these kinds of sentences are accepted in Arabic. For example, newspapers, magazines, and books use run-on sentences and readers can follow them with no confusion. The second mistake that students face in the effort to learn English is that they are often unfamiliar with English words and their meaning. A student might, for example, write a sentence such as about the flu and how it "spreads by peace with hand" (Gomez, 2014). What the Arab writer means with this sentence is that the flu spreads by handshake. However, the problem is that the word "greetings" in Arabic is also the same word used for peace. Hence, it is the translation of words as well as the multiple definitions of words that can lead to problems when Arabs both write and when they read. Hence, English as a Second Language teachers should work with students on vocabulary.

The third mistake, according to Gomaa, is in the use of punctuation, which causes Arab learners of English to commit many errors in their writing. Most of the female learners in Burydah Private Colleges language struggle with punctuation because Arabic has fewer limitations in its use of commas and periods than English, and it allows for the use of many commas within sentences. However, semi-colons are almost non-existent and exclamation marks are commonly used in their English writing. The fourth mistake is found in the organization of their writing. "Common concepts like 'thesis,' 'topic sentence,' and 'no new ideas in the conclusion' are all very foreign to Arabic essay. The circular structure in the English essay is contrasted with a very linear one in Arabic where the conclusion has to bring something new" (Gomaa, n.d., para.7).

Grammar Problems

Grammar is an area where there are many differences between Arabic and English. Because Arabic is a Semitic language it differs from English and there is a high "potential for errors of inference when the learners produce written or spoken English" (ESL/Frankfurt International School, 2014). Within the realm of grammar, one of the challenges that learners face is that the

basis of their language is words that are formed on three-root consonants that have fixed vowel patterns. In some cases, these words include an affix. Some learners in Burydah Private Colleges, it has been reported, might find themselves confused by the absence of such patterns in the English language, patterns that allow them to differentiate between nouns and verbs among other word type combinations (ESL/Frankfurt International School, 2014).

One area of English learning that has proved a struggle for Saudi female learners in Burydah Colleges is the use of verbs. According to Clement (2014), Arab native speakers often use the past form of verbs, and he states that, "It is not uncommon to hear from the learners that they never knew that the past form of 'write' is 'wrote' or 'swim' is 'swam'" (para, 1). While it might seem simple to teach Arab speakers to overcome the verb tenses challenge, teachers have encountered difficulty in this area. For example, Clement (2014) notes that in an effort to address the verb issues, the V1, V2, V3 method was used, where the students rhymed verbs in different tenses, such as "sing-sand-sung" (Clement, 2014). However, while the teacher notes that this approach created interest, it was not particularly effective.

What might help learners to learn English verb tenses, according to Clement (2014), is the use of direct and indirect speech. Clement (2014) notes the effectiveness of this method, and that it was based on the teacher having the students be "given from direct and indirect and vice-versa" (para, 7). The author also states that the students were then asked to report the conservations that they had with family members of their friends, and that this method worked because the students were able to use different verb tenses. This is the approach that Clement (2014) recommends for Arab learners of English as a second language (ESL).

Pronunciation Problems

Perhaps the greatest challenge the learners face in their effort to learn English is pronunciation. According to Jamal Ahmad (2011), all languages have rules for the combination of sound segments to make words with meaning, and people learn these rules through listening and by trial and error. As young people grow up, "they develop a linguistic competence through which they recognize and produce meaningful sounds" (Ahmad, 2011, p. 22–23). However, when the student is learning a second language, there are often overlaps in terms of the varied phoneme systems found in different languages.

The different phoneme systems that exist between languages are one of the main challenges that learners of English face. As Ahmad (2011) reports, when learners attempt to speak a second language, it is a problem that "they produce sounds which are closest to the sounds and also exist in their mother language" (Ahmad, 2011, p. 23). Ahmad (2011) provides examples of how Arab native speakers pronounce the word *play* as *blay*, as they are more used to the letter or sound of *b*

than *p*. This pronunciation issue, Ahmad (2011) states, is a problem in terms of communication for native Arab speakers.

However, Ahmad (2011) explains that researchers have uncovered several issues related to Arabic speakers' pronunciation in their attempts to learn English. For example, "learners have difficulty in pronouncing English initial consonant clusters having three members and final consonant

clusters of three and four members. In addition, some studies have shown that pronunciation issues among speakers of Arabic include intonation and stress, while others have found that Arabs tend to use anaptyctic vowels in both the onset and the coda within some English syllables.

Ahmad's (2011) research reveals that some Arabic speakers find it hard to pronounce certain sounds. For example, "most of the learners in Burydah Private Colleges faced problems while pronouncing the consonant sounds, /p/, /d/, /v/, /tʃ/, /ʒ/, and /ŋ/. They pronounce /p/ as /b/ when it appears in the initial and final positions of a word. They pronounce /d/ as /d/when it appears in the medial or final positions.

In light of the challenges found in pronunciation, several remedial steps can be taken. For example, that awareness is an important part of learning, and that ESL teachers should ensure that "learners are aware of the importance of English pronunciation within English language learning programs. Furthermore, the author states that teachers should also have a basic knowledge of IPA symbols, phonology, and phonetics. It is through awareness in these areas that students can guide themselves towards the correct pronunciation of letters and words.

Moreover, Ahmad (2011) claims that in teaching English, teachers need to consider the needs of students, particularly as there are students in the classroom with different levels of competency in areas such as their style and speed of learning. Hence, "The teacher should also conduct a students' needs analysis regarding pronunciation" (Ahmad, 2011, p. 34), and based on the needs of the learners the most suitable material should be created, and strategies drawn up to help the students with pronunciation problems.

As opposed to using a one-size-fits-all approach, Ahmad (2011) suggests that ESL teachers working with Arab students ought to focus on individual student needs. In terms of pronunciation, Ahmad (2011) states that, "Unfamiliar sounds—which do not exist in the learners' mother tongue—should be identified and given special attention" (p. 34). He also suggests that teachers should offer practice in IPA symbols and that oral communication should be a focus of the English program, such as students being asked to read aloud from a text and corrected when they mispronounce words.

Reading Problems

Saudi female students in Burydah Private Colleges also face challenges with reading, one of the main problems being the overall lack of literature in the Arab world. The reason for this is that the *Quran* is considered the most important book for Muslim Arabs, and it has "determined the course of Arabic literature" (Islami City, n.d.). Specifically, the earliest Arabic prose was not based on literary motivations but instead on religious and practical needs. In fact, even where it would appear that the Muslims of the past focused on literature with an interest in poetry, even with this genre of literature there was little interest in its literary aspects. Research suggests that the Arabic poets had "little interest in its artistic merit" (Islami City, n.d.). The focus of poetry, as with other forms of literature, has long been its place in terms of religion.

It is in this context the learners often face challenges with reading, as much of their reading is based on religious texts. Indeed, according to Akasha (2013), "Many researchers regard the lack of authentic texts as a problem that faces Arabic-speaking ESL students" (p. 15). A further challenge that learners face is that in learning English there is a lack of texts related to them on either a linguistic or a cultural level. The lack of bilingual texts for Arabic-speaking ESL students can also pose a challenge to their efforts to learn English.

The solution to this problem of a lack of literature is for ESL teachers of the learners to create their own materials. While waiting for publishers and developers of ESL books and tools, teachers might consider creating their own materials that relate to the learners as a means of more effectively engaging them in learning the English language.

On a more advanced level, the Arab first language speakers are also not used to different genres of writing. As mentioned earlier, on the academic level for example, these students are not used to concepts such as "thesis," "topic sentence," and "no new ideas in the conclusion" (Gomaa, 2014). In addition, the learners are often not used to the organization of writing required, and this is partially due to the fact that English is circular while Arabic is linear (Gomaa, 2014). the learners who are used to reading works such as the *Quran* and poetry might not have been exposed to various genres of writing, each with its own unique form of organization.

Hence, teachers should work with students to go beyond the basics of grammar and pronunciation and introduce them to the types of writing they will be exposed to and, more importantly, that they will be required to use during their academic careers should they pursue college or university studies in English. Even ESL learners who are not seeking a higher level of education in English should be taught the different genres of writing in English to gain a better understanding of the various types of writing they may come across in their lives, ranging from op-ed pieces in newspapers to technical reports and other writing genres.

Communication Problems

Learners face a wide range of difficulties related to communication. learners find it difficult to communicate freely in the target language. The reasons for such difficulty in communicating may be based on the previously discussed issues such as pronunciation and the use of verb tenses. However, the reasons why learners might face challenges is due to the teaching methods and the learning environment.

In addition to the basic communication errors that students might make in areas such as syntax and spelling, Rabab'ah (2011) states that students face challenges in expressing themselves in a comfortable and efficient manner when dealing with both academic subjects and common, everyday topics. The problem, the author states, may relate to deficiencies in communication competence and in self-expression. Furthermore, the researcher notes that the failure of learners in using English to express themselves may relate to past teaching methods.

Therefore, ESL teachers may consider using teaching methods that encourage the students' self-expression. Lessons might incorporate opportunities for self-expression, such as in modules or components that focus on conversational aspects of English language learning. Moreover, teachers can, as previously suggested, consider learning more about the student in terms of his or her English abilities and then tailor course materials around their skill levels.

Conclusion

Saudi female students of Burydah Private Colleges face numerous challenges in learning English; from grammar issues to pronunciation, writing problems to communication, there are many obstacles to overcome. Fortunately, teachers can use many methods to address the challenges. They are advised to learn about their students' levels of proficiency and tailor their teaching around these, create their own materials to help the learners connect with the material, and offer opportunities for conversation and self-expression to enhance the learners learning of English.

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