

The English Learning Arab

Jayalakshmi S

Research Scholar; Bharatiar University
Coimbatore – Tamil Nadu - India

Abstract : Cultural incorporated learning for better acquisition of English in an Arabic classroom where the students bring to the class a complexity of cultural and social influence which strongly contrast with the learning of English. Importance of incorporating indigenous teaching methods in the learning of English is stressed as the method provides an opportunity to learn through adaptation and flexibility and engage in meaningful experiences that connect to students' social lives.

Attempting to learn about the challenges of the Arabic students who learn English as a second language is as intricate and complex as any other similar situations, or more so because of the deep cultural aspect Arabs attribute to Arabic. In modern usage 'Arab' refers to a heterogeneous collection of Arabic-speaking people in the Arab world. The ties that bind Arabs are ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and political. Arabic is not just a medium of communication for Arabs, but an extension of religious, cultural, social and personal aspects of their life. It is a link that connects them to the past. Arabic is the official language in many countries, but it is very different from country to country. Arabic is also the language of the Koran, so followers of Islam from all countries are familiar with it.

Modern Standard Arabic is considered the lingua franca in many Arabic-speaking nations. It is used in current Arabic publications and spoken in Arabic media and understood by many educated Arabic speakers. Colloquial Arabic, also known as dialectal Arabic, refer to the many varieties of Arabic dialects used in everyday exchanges.

There is a large potential of errors of interference when Arab learners produce written or spoken English. With the fact that Arabic is a morphologically richer language than English, its interference while learning English as a foreign language is more obvious and detectable. The Arabic language is distinguished by its resilience and stability over more than 1,500 years, so that it may be the only language which has not undergone radical changes. An educated Arab today is able to read books from classical times and ancient manuscripts with relative ease in spite of the differences in letter forms. In contrast, the situation among European languages is different in that, a great deal of change has befallen them, especially now that the total number of officially recognized European languages has reached 41 in 45 countries. Most of these languages share a common origin, going back to the same linguistic roots, and differ superficially, with dialects resembling one another from one area to another. Such dialects today correspond to their cultures. This situation is due to the fact that the Arabic language is inflectional for case, whereas most European languages are not. Most European languages have lost their inflectional/case system, while Arab language scholars have from ancient times, noticed and devoted books in the structure of sentences and other basic assets which belong to the deepest nature of the language and have maintained their existence.

Today's Arab world is synonymous to development, cultural fusion and flourish of business. Knowledge of English is the need of the hour. It is not easy to turn your back to the opportunities put forward by the modern world and pretend that you don't need them anyway. English is invariably the global language now and takes an important role in turning the huge world into a global village. The overwhelming dominance of English language makes it

imperative for an aspiring Arab to learn English to be a prominent part of this fast changing world.

But for most Arabic speaking people, English has not yet replaced Arabic even in multicultural classrooms. Though English has evolved as a global language, Arabic is the very essence of their ethnicity and it is an invariable medium which binds them close to their culture and religion. Yet, the pressure of the present advancing world compels the Arabic youth to learn English.

A native Arabic primary/ elementary student's English is heavily punctuated by the influence of Arabic in all areas like pronunciation, intonation, stress and phonology. English has its own set of patterns and rules which leads to comparison and blind imitation of pattern in most second language learning situations. Moreover, a native Arabic speaker brings to the class complexity of social and personal variables that influence heavily and punctuate strongly the second language learning. Paired with this, he/ she will have to face an instructor who is heavily laden with their own cultural back log as most of the private and public schools prefer natives or other nationalities to teach English. A teacher in an expatriate situation is not just dealing with cultures of two different countries. Adrian Holliday argues that a typical teacher will be involved with a variety of cultures: those of nation, of the specific academic discipline, of international education, of the host institution, of the class room, and of the student themselves.

Not many studies are conducted to better equip teachers to handle this situation or to better involve students in an active learning atmosphere. Learning in most of the class rooms are heavy repetitions of severe methods which are proven successful in understanding grammatical structures and gaining better grades. Responses from different sources point out the fact that the satisfactory or good exam results of Arabic students do not result in a better English language proficiency, which still remains low.

Many of the Arabic children go to private/international schools with the only aim of acquiring proficiency in English. If the family is wealthy, then most likely their children learn in private schools, this trend is prevalent now in the households of educated and non-educated Arabs. The new generation shows great interest in studying English and they look forward to becoming fluent in using English. The booming economic and business growth puts the present day Arab at the risk of being behind global standards if they don't achieve proficiency in English. Due to the political instability in their region, an Arab with an average earning will focus on giving the best English education to their children to ensure the global door of opportunities are open for them; while English remains to be the world's business language. But however advanced the situation is, a strong cultural, social and religious bond tie Arabs to Arabic. Many languages around the world are in the brim of becoming extinct or forgotten. The new generation, fast acquiring proficiency in English, is often found being incompetent in their own mother tongue. But Arabic remains an integral part of an Arab's economic future and is not at all a cultural relic of the past.

According to UNESCO, literacy in Gulf States is 98%, but the literacy is increasing in English and not Arabic, according to Erin Burnette, the anchor of CNN's Erin Burnett Out Front.

Even in an educated Arab house hold, communication generally happens in Arabic. So the only way to learn English is through formal instruction, inside the class room. Natural interaction in the target language is a minimum, and even the libraries don't have much to offer where a student can get an experience of English outside the school.

Mastering the use of four skill don't happen in a balanced level, and grammar and writing skills are given utmost importance as in any other case where English is learnt as a second language.

There definitely is a need for the improvement of instruction methods by understanding the areas of difficulties in teaching and learning of English as a second language. It is next to impossible to think about a successful learning method separating English from the Arabic culture. The culture that is amalgamated in English contradicts so strongly with the conservative Arabic cultural experience expressed in Arabic which proves a hindrance too high to overcome. For the learning process to be meaningful and relevant an integration of local culture and context is inevitable while learning English as a target language.

The fundamental relationship between language and culture is very strong in Arab classrooms. A competent teacher's understanding of the target language (English) is not enough in Arab classrooms, but her understanding of the local language culture also carry an important role. as we usually say 'language is more than just a code. It also involves social practices of interpreting and making meanings.'

An intelligent teacher has to make smart interferences where this 'interpreting' is concerned. It is important for an English second language teacher who goes to an Arab class room to consider seriously how language as code and language as a social practice are balanced. Teachers need to constantly reflect and refer back to what language is in an Arab world. Without this referral back an English second language teacher may fail to even grab the attention of Arab students. Her understanding of the local culture and language-culture connections affect the way they teach a language.

Viewing language only as a code and giving more importance to its structure may not open up the complexities involved in using language for communication. This difference sums up all the hazards an English second language teacher might encounter in an Arab class room.

Language is a social practice in which one has to participate and hence, is heavily reflective of the culture, social practices, beliefs and traditions and religion for an Arab. When he attempts to learn a new language, he immediately applies these rules and understanding to the learning process. This happens almost unconsciously as his L1 is strongly connected to his social, moral and cultural sense. The new language behavior heavily contradicts with his language culture and conscious resistance arises, which leads to an Arab student not engaging with English as a communicative reality but meagerly as an intellectual exercise. With the progress of learning structures in English, he fails to communicate their own personal meanings or develop personal connections with the new language.

This is where the ice has to be broken. English should be taught to an Arab as a system of personal connection with a new world and different culture where he can identify the diversity at a personal level. Language learning should not limit itself to learning 'a new code' in which case relationship between his mother tongue and English will shrink to a matter of code replacement where a whole lot of errors awaits.

In the scenario of an Arab class room where both the students and teachers come from different cultures and the target language brings in an entirely different culture perspective, the idea of 'being intercultural' becomes crucially important. This is the strongest hazard in such classrooms, which, if not turned for an ideal base for learning the target language, will make the entire process of teaching- learning a difficult experience. Both the learner and the teacher need to become familiar with how they can engage with linguistic and cultural diversity.

It might not be a regular, method based programme that a classroom like this needs, but indeed is a more realistic and practical one; one that will enable the student to be confident of using English much better than he is doing now, with less holdbacks.

An extract from the foreword of a hand book, 'Start Talking: Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning and Difficult Dialogues

written by Ilarion (Larry) Mercurieff and Libby Roderick published in 2008 reads so:

“We are people from widely different backgrounds and cultures who have met across a great divide. In order to do this work, some of us had to put aside habits of mind so deeply engrained that we can only barely imagine any other way. Along the way, we pried open a few windows that had been painted shut, let in some fresh and natural air, and stepped outside to feel the wind and notice the sky for ourselves. We stopped talking, learned to still the voices in our heads. We listened, observed, reflected, engaged, learned, and became better educators.”

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