

Linguistic and Cultural Difficulties Encounter ESL Arabic-Speaking Students

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to reveal challenges facing Arabic-speaking ESL students. 30 Arabic-speaking ESL students and five teachers in Administrative Secretarial institute in Kuwait participated in this exploratory study. Research questions focused on the needs of the Arabic-speaking ESL students, the factors that influence their learning, and the problems the teachers face in supporting these students. Data sources included teacher and student interviews, and classroom test. Data showed that the students face challenges to learn the English language, the culture, and curricular content using their limited English. The study concluded that several important challenges for teachers and students exist, including time, language support, and knowledge. The study is organized into four sections. Section One identifies the rationale, scope and aims of the study. Section Two highlights the data collection methods adopted. Section Three provides theoretical analysis on the findings. And Section Four clarifies the causes of the participant students' challenges.

Keywords: Linguistic, Cultural, Difficulties, ESL, Arabic-Speaking, Students

1. Introduction

Arabic-speaking ESL students may struggle like other ESL students. Their struggling can be related to many factors, including cultural and linguistic factors. Teachers' lack of awareness of these factors can also affect Arab students' achievement (Aubrey, 2009; Burt & Peyton, 2003; Miller & Endo, 2004; Palmer et al., 2007). Therefore, it is very important to examine the factors that face this particular group to help them overcome any problems they may encounter in the learning process.

A number of studies argue that many ESL students face difficulties in learning English at various levels and with different skills (e.g. McCardle and Hoff, 2006; Hoffman, 2001). Give much more attention to the Arab region in terms of language difficulties Arabic-speaking students encounter while learning English language. (Seargeant, and Swann, 2011; Mayor, and Allington, 2012; Tagg and Hewings, 2012). Highlight that concerns about difficulties Arab students learning English encounter become more serious issue as English language become the language of trade, science, communication and etc...

The British Council seminar (Beirut, 2012) emphasized the need to study the specific linguistic and cultural requirements of learners in different regions in order to devise an appropriate curriculum that would cater for the specific needs of the learners.

Several initiatives are underway to identify and understand the difficulties associated with studying English in the Arabic context and to propose teaching and learning support that can provide remedial intervention.

2. Research Methodology

Descriptive analysis methodology is adopted in this study.

3. Population of the Study

The population of this study is 30 students from the Administrative Secretary Institute in Kuwait city.

4. Data Collection Methods

The participants (30 students of Administrative and Secretarial Institute in Kuwait) were subject to an assessment to evaluate their writing and speaking (productive skills), where they were required to write on a specified topic that related to their academic program of study. The duration of the assessment was 60 minutes. They also were assessed by providing them time to speak about any topic related to their study. The setting was controlled and matched regular assessment exams, with invigilators, halls, distribution of students, etc. Academic staff from the English department was commissioned to correct, review and monitor the assessment. The results were analyzed to look deeper into areas of difficult that students face in comprehending and producing English.

5. Language Difficulties Arab Students encounter

5.1 Theoretical Concept

Arab learners of English encounter many problems when they learn English. This fact Has been clearly presented by many researchers, e.g. Abdul Haq [2], Harrison, Prator and Tucker [9], Abbad [1] and Wahba [21]. The Arab students, in Kuwait, for example, learn English in their native country, where the native language is Arabic. The only way to Learn English in Kuwait is through formal instruction, i.e. inside the classroom where The language teachers at school are mostly native speakers of Arabic. There is little Opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the target language. This is Only possible when students encounter native speakers of English who come to the Country as tourists and this rarely happens. English is not used in daily life. Arabic is the Language used everywhere. The situation is different in the United Arab Emirates, for Example, where people use English in their daily lives because of the multilingual nature Of the residents.

It is thus more difficult for Kuwaiti learners of English to communicate In the target language in real life situations. Some difficulties are catered here in terms of time, accuracy, practice or system of teaching in general. Many studies on second language suggested a specific number of years required to gain competence in academic aspects of the second language. Collier (1987), Klesmer (1994) and Cummins (2000) propose the interval of "at least 5 years of continued practice" to achieve a good level of

appropriate academic proficiency in the second language. Academic proficiency is understood to cover writing skills, reading comprehension, knowledge of a range of vocabulary items including specific lexis and technical terms, and a developed syntactic repertoire. Corder (1981) stressed that the range of writing skills required need to reflect agreement of content with context and the subject matter discussed.

Krashen suggests that natural communicative input is the key to designing a successful syllabus. The learner improves and progresses when he or she receives second language input that is one step beyond his or her current stage of linguistic competence. So from scholars and researchers point of view syllabuses designing, teaching and learning process should integrate to create an energetic learning environment that helps students to master English effectively; and this is to great extent lacked in Arabic context.

6. Results:

The results of this study could be analyzed based in two aspects; linguistic difficulties and cultural difficulties, concerning linguistic difficulties the results of the test conducted could clearly reveal and provide a vivid answer to the question; Do Arabic-speaking students face linguistic difficulties when they learn English? Cultural and background difficulties which may encompasses religious and social aspects are presented in reference to an extensive literature provided in the issue.

6.1 Linguistic difficulties:

After conducting the assessment results have shown many language difficulties encounter Arab speakers learning English; these difficulties could be stated as follows:

6.2 Mother tongue:

The mother tongue of Arab students is quite different from English. It is one of the major barriers for ELs to learn English language because Arabic is unique in its accent, sounds or pronunciation as compared to English. The expression of each word in Arabic is individual in nature on contrary to English; even some English letters have more than one sound. Some letters or alphabets in English are pronounced as silent when they are used in a word or in a sentence. Therefore, in the start of language learning, Arabic is used in classes to make ESL students understand English lessons well.

6.3 Pronunciation:

Pronunciation of English language is different from Arabic. For Arab students it is a quite hard challenge to learn about the sounds or alphabets of English, vowels and how to express these sounds and this could be because they start exposing to natural English very late. They have difficulty to express the sound of some alphabets like b and v due to the change in dialect. ELs at the early stage miss some of the sounds or may mix the sound with other alphabet (eds. Swan, 2001). Like Arabic have 28 consonants whereas English has 21, each of them with different sound (eds. Swan, 2001).

When exposing the learners to native English speakers, it is very important to get the right pronunciation, intonation, stress and speed of the natives. That is why Arab students find great difficulty following the lecturers - some even need to join language schools to even understand the right pronunciation and understanding till they get used to it.

6.4 Grammar:

English is grammatically different with reference to Arabic in terms of tenses and helping verbs which is never exist in Arabic language and this cause a big dilemma for Arab students. So there are more chances or errors when Arabs are learning English language. English is supported by auxiliaries while in Arabic there are no helping verbs. ELs face problems to adjust the auxiliaries in their sentences when they write and speak English. Learners of English tend to think that it is hard to control the different tenses in which English uses helping verbs. These incorporate refutation "He hasn't been drinking", reversal with the subject to frame a question "Has he been drinking?" short answers (e.g. Yes, he has.) and label questions "has he?" (Wikipedia.org, 2017)

English language has idioms or phrases to express more in fewer words whilst Arabic has no idioms which create complexity for the EL. English has definite and indefinite articles whereas Arabic does not have them. It is difficult for an Arab speaker to remember when to use indefinite article.

6.5 Vowels:

Subjects of the study have problems with vowels based on the test conducted results, it has been clearly shown that they can't differentiate between vowels and consonants and how they function and affect English word syllabus .This could because students have never been taught about letters to that deep or to the lack of practice in terms of continuous assessment and use.

One of the main problems in pronouncing consonants include the inability to produce the 'th' sounds in words such as this and thin, the swapping of /b/ and /p/ at the beginning of words, and the substitution of /f/ for /v/". "Consonant clusters, such as in the words split, threw or lengths, also cause problems and often result in the speaker adding an extra vowel: spilit, ithrew or lengthes" (eds. Swan, 2001). Stress in sound of words is common with reference to Arabic while in English it should be restricted.

6.6 Vocabulary:

Phrasal verbs and idioms are the most areas need attention according to the test results students are totally ignored these areas; Students shown a very limited vocabulary knowledge and also show a very poor in words meaning guessing within a context which reflects a very poor and limited teaching when handling vocabulary lessons. Exposing students to the real language (English that is used every day by native speakers) never exist in their classes and this is one of the most successful tools and techniques that enrich the vocabulary.

6.7 Spellings:

Students were not good in English spellings because they lack practice and they rarely have or practice dictation and this is the main hindrance for them to memorize the spellings of the words.

6.8 English Teachers:

According to Fareh (2010), another challenging situation for Arabs that the teachers from whom they are learning L2 (English language) are not trained enough to help out the Arabs according to their needs of learning. English teachers are from different backgrounds and culture. Their bases are quite opposite to Arab speakers. It's significant of nature for the teachers to know the resident language of Arabs which is Arabic so that they can more conveniently deliver. It is very advantageous to understand the aspect that influence students adversely in order to assist them shape on the positive aspect alternately. In addition, teachers should be apprised of the fact that despite the majority of Arabs is Muslims, there are also a limited number of non-Muslims (Christians and Jews) who speak Arabic and settle in Arab countries.

6.9 Methods of teaching:

Methods of teaching English are not modern and teacher of L2 are not equipped with modern tools of teaching this particular language which is of great importance. Teachers are not familiar with instruments necessary to step out the Arabs from complexity of learning English. For example, the use of projector, audios, videos, computer laboratory practical are not taking into consideration.

6.10 Curriculum:

Syllabus is not updated according to the needs of real and modern requirements which are creating problems for the ELs. Whether they learn this language, they are not capable enough to use it flawlessly in the time of need. There are no real world situation practices for them. The number of chapter used in the curriculum are extensive that the instructor just tries to cover that in time which creates more complexity for the ELs.

6.11 English writing:

It's compulsory for ELs or EFL learners to learn the skill of writing English because it's an essential part of learning (Fageeh, 2011). ELs' listening, reading and speaking skills are concerned mainly with competency in writing English (Heffernan, 2006). Writing English is of greater importance during the whole learning process, when offering ESL to Arab world (Hinkel, 2004). Arabic writing style is pretty diverse from English writing that's a foremost difficulty for Arabs to learn that style. Writing difficulties encounter Arab students could be due to the difficulty they face in other skills since all these skills are integrated. From the test it was clear that students have many difficulties in writing full sentence with correct punctuation and connections. So writing difficulties may be as a result of poor teaching of writing skills or due to the lack of good planning before starting writing.

7. Cultural Factors:

It's important for native English teachers in order to support the engagement of all students' from Arabic-speaking countries and to support authenticity in classroom tasks and avoid disengaging Arabic-speaking ESL students from classroom activities, to know something about Arab culture. Aburumuh, Smith & Ratcliffe (2009) conducted a study to examine educators' knowledge and perceptions of Arabic and Islamic cultures... The study found that most participants lack basic knowledge about Arab and Islamic culture, including knowledge of Muslim holidays, such as Eid al Fitr. Moreover, most participants mistakenly considered Ramadan to be a Muslim holiday, when in fact, it is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar when Muslims are required to fast during the whole month from dawn to sunset. This knowledge can be useful for teachers so they can provide safe environments for students during Ramadan and other important days. For example, teachers may avoid scheduling tests during Islamic holidays and enable students to go to Lunchtime during Ramadan (Aburumuh, Smith & Ratcliffe, 2009; Ariza, 2006; Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 2002).

Moreover, Brisk (2010) pointed out that culture has an impact on Arabic-speaking ESL students' interactions in the classroom. She gave an example of Sudanese Muslim girls who disengaged from interacting with boys in their groups. This disengagement occurred as a result of their own culture that needs to be understood by teachers in order to help students fully engage in classroom activities. However, giving such opportunities for Arabic-speaking ESL students is not enough without sufficient knowledge of the students' cultural and background knowledge. To demonstrate cultural awareness and support authenticity, Wingfield & Karaman (2001) suggested some actions, such as introducing Arabic language and literature in the classroom to encourage Arab students to participate and interact in the learning process. Moreover, Santos & Suleiman (1993) believed that teachers can support Arabic-speaking ESL students by adjusting their curriculum to include the students' culture and considering their lifestyle. For example, teachers can include the role of Arab scholars during medieval Islamic civilization in different fields, such as medicine (Ibn al-Nafis, Ibn-Sina, Al-Razi, and Ibn al-Haytham), geography (Al-Idrisi, Ibn-Batuta, and Ibn-Khaldun), mathematics (Al-Khwārizmī), chemistry (Ibn Hayyān), and other disciplines (Santos & Suleiman, 1993). By including such ideas, Arabic-speaking ESL students can be engaged and involved in the class content. Most importantly, Egbert et al. (2007) suggested that learners should be involved in authentic tasks to ensure efficient and effective language learning.

8. Recommendations:

As for as English language is concerned, English is considered as a second/foreign language or L2 in all the non-English speaking countries. Like other countries where resident language is not English it is significant to learn it. With reference to this, Arab speakers with resident language of Arabic must make

efforts to learn English and to cope with the difficulties and challenges coming across the way of getting their goals to be accomplished. When the research finds a number of difficulties, the major one of that inaccuracy and error is in policy making on national and international levels where English is not included as a major elective subject to teach to the students having various native languages, which later on creates more problems for the learners due to non-familiarity with the basis of English language. According to Al-Nasser (2015), some methods are here to remove the challenges and difficulties faced by Arab speakers which are as follows:

English as a proper subject from early-age schooling. It has been observed that Arabs use to learn English in senior standards whereas in west it starts from Montessori and KG. When this language is included as proper subject in early ages of schooling, Arabs are in better position to learn the basics of English like pronunciation, verbs, grammar, phonics, phrases and idioms, accent and tenses. It is a better exercise to give ELs the practical assignment of English rather than using just textbooks. As children learn through images, instructor or teacher of English language should use pictures and images which will leave long-lasting impact on the memory of ELs because they are in the primary stages of their lives which help them to learn more easily and quickly.

8.1 Quality of teaching:

It has been previously discussed in English learning difficulty that curriculum for ELs is according to modern standards. English teachers are assigned with the task to cover number of chapters in time so they are primarily focusing on covering syllabus rather than delivering the quality of the material. Then evaluating whether ELs are perceiving and understanding in the right direction or not, there is a significant need to revise the curriculum as per modern requirements and to be concerned with concise syllabus but of quality that the learners easily and practically can perform well. ELs should not be focusing on covering the number of pages instead they should get the construct behind the language.

8.2 Evaluation:

English should not be treated like any other subject in terms of evaluation; English should be comprehensively evaluated, not just check out how well students have memorized, they evaluation should encompass all the four skills and systematically arranged. When EL is learning English it means he/she is developing a skill which will help him/her till the end of academic years, during professional career and even in personal life. Examination is a tool to check whether what has been taught to the student in the classroom is memorized by him or her. Students always try to memorize the syllabus for getting marks in exams. English language is not the game of marks rather it is a philosophy of how to develop a skill which already you don't have. Therefore, listening, speaking, reading and writing skills must be evaluated by the English instructors as well.

8.3 Minimizing students number in the class:

It is a general rule in teaching, the lesser the number of students, the better a teacher is able to handle or deliver and the more improved outcomes can be derived. Classroom environment should allow the ELs to freely interact the instructor and ask for the queries. Instructor can explain in more detail as he/she has some spare time to handle and help each student.

8.4 Audio and Visual aids should be used as teaching material:

Language is not like other subjects. For example like a math sum, teacher puts an equation on board and teaches the formula or tactic to solve that. Once student gets that formula, he applies on other sums too and gets results but English is quite different from it. In English, the ELs have to learn the accent, pronunciation which can be taught through audio aids used in classroom. Then ELs use those lessons by speaking in actual, finding mistakes and errors pointed out by the instructor and then again improving those mistakes by keep on practicing. For using such aids, it's important to have such technology in classrooms and instructors' training to use those tools related to audio and visual aids to facilitate the ELs. Textbook is not an effective method of teaching this language. It can be more effectively learned through stories, films and discussions.

8.5 More English class timings:

As it is mentioned in first method that English should be included as a subject in early ages of schools similarly the other subjects like Math, Arabic and Science etc. English also requires more hours for studying as a language to communicate everywhere with everyone. According to a research, at least 6 hours in a week are quite reasonable to ELs in early ages (Al-Nasser, 2015). When ELs spend more time to learn English language, they have more competence to accomplish their goals.

9. Conclusion:

As it is highlighted in this research paper, there are so many difficulties encounter Arab students when they learn English. These difficulties could be due to linguistics factors, cultural factors, teachers' experience with ELs and their backgrounds. So there could be more extensive research on exploring more solutions to these difficulties, also by directly asking to the Arabic speakers ELs about difficulties they are actually facing in the real world cases by interviewing with them when enrolling in English language programs or taking up English classes. One more thing that could be explored is difficulties faced by Arabs when some of them learn American English and some of them learn British English. Then remedial measure can be found to cater that issue accordingly.

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