

The ESL Dept. Blog

News, activities, resources, and discussions for the ESL staff at Palomar College

Thursday, November 1, 2012

Problems Arabic Students Have in English

Attending the CATESOL Regional Conference two weekends ago, Marcel went to an interesting session on problems Arabic students or any other Middle Eastern students (who write from right to left) have when learning English. It was quite surprising at what these students must face to learn the English language. Marcel also did some research on his own regarding their linguistic problems. He would like to share the following blog entry with everyone as it might help them.

A. Problems Arabic students have learning English

1. They have problems with 'b' or 'd' in a word when writing it. It is confusing to them because they are mirror image of each other. They would write something like 'sudway' instead of 'subway'. They may have problems with words like "bomb, tomb, comb" all end in 'omb' even when they don't rhyme. These examples show how convoluted English can be for Arabic students.
2. Arabs have difficulty differentiating between 'p' and 'b'. Since Arabic has no 'p' sound Arab speakers will often say 'p' as 'b' like banda bear or bolice.
3. They have difficulty in knowing the difference between 'f' and 'v' because there is no 'v' in Arabic. So you will hear many Arabs say 'fery' instead of 'very'. This isn't as widespread at the 'p' vs. 'b' sound.
4. English has many vowel sounds while Arabic only has a few vowel sounds. The words 'pit', 'pet', 'put', 'pot', and 'pat' might be the hardest in the entire language for Arabic speakers to pronounce and recognize. Words that are only differentiated by their vowel sound are tough. Some Arabic students do not know the difference in sound between 'bomb', 'pump', and 'bump'. The 'o' and 'u' sound are hard for them as well as the 'p' and 'b'. Another example is the difference between 'six' (6) and 'sex' which causes problems to Arabic students. The 'e' sound in 'sex' just isn't found in Arabic. Many Arabs will say 'sixy' instead of 'sexy'. However, these mistakes don't cause too much difficulty in understanding. As long as the word that is said incorrectly is in a sentence to give it context an Arabic student can understand it. However if someone asks an Arab what "sex" means and they're saying it wrong (like asking what pit means when they actually are trying to ask what pet means), then you can run into problems because the Arab student doesn't hear it correctly.

B. The differences between English and Arabic language

1. Arabic is the official language in many countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Morocco. Arabic is also the language of the Koran, so Muslims of all nationalities, such as Indonesians, are familiar with it. There are many Arabic dialects, but there is one version that is taught in schools and used by the media across the Arab world.
2. Arabic is from the Semitic language family, hence its grammar is very different from English. There is a large potential for errors of interference when Arab learners produce written or spoken English.
3. Arabic has a three consonant root as its basis. All words (parts of speech) are formed by combining the three-root consonants with fixed vowel patterns and, sometimes, an affix.

Greetings

Good Morning! Today is September 7, 2016 . 99 days to the end of the fall semester.

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Arab learners may be confused by the lack of patterns in English that would allow them to distinguish nouns from verbs or adjectives, etc.

4. Arabic has 28 consonants (English 24) and 8 vowels/diphthongs (English 22). Short vowels are unimportant in Arabic, and indeed do not appear in writing. Texts are read from right to left and written in a cursive script. No distinction is made between upper and lower case, and the rules for punctuation are much looser than in English.

These fundamental differences between the Arabic and English writing systems cause Arab learners significant problems. They usually need much more time to read or write than their English-learning peers from the Indo-European language families.

5. Phonologically English has about three times as many vowel sounds as Arabic, so it is inevitable that beginning learners will fail to distinguish between some of the words they hear, such as *ship / sheep* or *bad / bed*, and will have difficulties saying such words correctly.

6. Arab students will have difficulty 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*.

7. In Arabic word stress is regular. It is common, therefore, for Arab learners to have difficulties with the seemingly random nature of English stress patterns. For example, the word *yesterday* is stressed on the first syllable and *tomorrow* on the second.

8. The elision (or swallowing) of sounds that is so common in spoken English. This can cause problems for Arab speakers. Consider the example in questions like *What did you do?* or *Do you know her?* In conversational English it would be phrased and pronounced as: *Whatcha do? / Jew know her?* This aversion to elision and the use of glottal stop before initial vowels are the primary reasons for the typical *staccato* quality of the spoken English of Arab learners.

9. In Grammar of the verb and tense Arabic has no verb *to be* in the present tense, and no auxiliary *do*. There is a single present tense in Arabic, as compared to English, which has the simple and continuous forms. These differences result in errors such as *She good teacher, When you come to Germany?, I flying to Egypt tomorrow* or *Where he going?*

10. Arabic does not make the distinction between actions completed in the past with and without a connection to the present. So Arabic students have problems with the present perfect tense, as in *I finished my work. Can you check it?*

11. There are no modal verbs in Arabic. This, for example, leads to: *From the possible that I am late. (I may be late.)* Another common mistake is to infer that an auxiliary is needed and make mistakes such as: *Do I must do that?*

12. 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, Arab 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.

13. Adjectives in Arabic follow the noun they qualify. This leads Arab beginners to making word order mistakes in written or spoken English.

14. Arabic requires the inclusion of the pronoun in relative clauses, unlike English, in which the pronoun is omitted. This results in mistakes like: *Where is the pen which I gave it to you yesterday.*

15. Vocabulary: There are very few English/Arabic cognates. This significantly increases the difficulties they have in comprehending what they hear and read, and the effort they must make to acquire a strong English word store.

- Democracy Now - a daily TV/radio news program
- National Film Board of Canada
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- Academic Earth
- TED
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- Full-Length Documentaries
- The Archaeology Channel
- National Geographic
- Khan Academy
- News Update - CCTV News (recommended only for its international news coverage)
- Metacafe
- Dailymotion
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