

# International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

ISSN: 2308-5460



## Study of Cultural Challenges Faced by the Arab Learners of English in the United States of America

[PP: 36-40]

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### ABSTRACT

Learning English poses many challenges to ESL/ EFL learners. These challenges are often attributed to differences in two different languages and the two different teaching and learning environments. However, along with the language teaching and learning related difficulties, ESL/EFL learners from certain communities also face other challenges due to cultural differences. This is quite noticeable in relation to Arab learners travelling to western countries like USA, UK, Canada, and Australia. Arab learners have to face cultural racism and negativity while studying and living in these countries. The negative portrayal of Muslims, particularly of the Arabs, has stereotyped Muslims and Arabs into certain types which further complicate their problems. They face difficulties in expressing their cultural and religious needs and adjusting in completely new and different culture. Being such students in the United States of America and having faced this problem personally, we have attempted to offer an overview of these cultural challenges faced by the Arab learners who travel to the States to pursue their higher educations. It is expected that the findings of the study may help the institutions and teachers in developing a teaching framework which would assist the Arab learners in overcoming their cultural challenges and coping with the same in the western countries like the USA.

**Keywords:** *ESL Learners, EFL, Arab Learners, Cultural Challenges, Religious Needs*

ARTICLE	The paper received on	Reviewed on	Accepted after revisions on
INFO	10/01/2018	08/04/2018	30/05/2018

### Suggested citation:

Al Khaiyali, T., Nuseir, N. & Kharruba, R. (2018). Study of Cultural Challenges Faced by the Arab Learners of English in the United States of America. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 6(2). 36-40.

### 1. Introduction

Many Arab students from different countries like-Saudi Arabia, Libya, Oman receive scholarships from their countries to pursue their undergraduate, graduate and higher studies in the United States of America. It has been reported that Arabic-speaking populations witnessed a dramatic growth of 25% of the normal rates between 2000 and 2007 (Shiri, 2007). These Arab students increasingly join English as a Second language (ESL) programs before they start their degrees, and normally show noticeable interest and enthusiasm in learning the English language. However, Arab students encounter some linguistic and cultural challenges that impact their performance in learning the language (Derderian-Aghajanian, & Cong, 2012; Huwari & Aziz, 2011; Khan, 2011; Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ruzic, 1983;

Van De Wege, 2013). In addition to this, other challenges and difficulties such as cultural, social and background related obstacles have also been reported by a considerable numbers of research studies (Abu Rass, 2011; Drucker, 2003; Orgocka, 2004). With this background, this paper offers an overview of some of the cultural challenges faced by the Arab students while pursuing their education in general and while learning English in particular. It is assumed that providing this background could shape the basic linguistic knowledge of these learners and might help the American teachers in English to provide meaningful and rigors teaching environments to these students.

As mentioned above, a considerable number of Arab students join ESL centers before they start pursuing their undergraduate or graduate studies and are

normally interested in learning English language. Nevertheless, some students encounter some challenges and problems in their English language programs. These problems and challenges are due to differences in two language systems- Arabic and English. However, it is to be noted here that along with the linguistic difficulties, the Arab learners also face many cultural challenges due to differences in two completely different cultures. The increasing Islamophobia and the negative portrayal of Muslims in general and Arabs in particular in the media further worsens their situation. In this respect, Akasha (2013) reports that Arabic speaking ESL students' struggling in the USA was related to cultural factors along with other factors. A study by Kamalipour (2000), which collected data from 500 high school students and focused on the students' perceptions of Arabs and Middle Easterners, found that the participants associated the Middle East with war, terrorism, oil, desert, camels, sand, hate, fanatics, radical, oppression, dark skin, funny dressings, black veils, oppressed women etc. and viewed Arabs as terrorists, hijackers, tent-dwellers, anti-Americans, rebels etc.

With this background, this paper aimed to offer an overview of such cultural challenges faced by the Arab ESL, ESP, EFL learners while pursuing their education in the United States of America. It has objective that such an overview may help in formulating comprehensive teaching and coping plans for the Arab learners by the American teachers to help the Arab learners to cope with such challenges in meaningful and encouraging manner.

## 2. Literature Review

It was reported that many Arabic-speaking migrants and students started coming to the U.S. in the early eighties. In 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that more than 3.5 million Americans are of Arab descents who live across the 50 states (Kayyali, 2006). According to the Arabic Institute Foundation (2012), the Arabic-speaking populations grew from 1,000,000 in 1980s up to 3,665,789 in 2010. However, the total census of the Arabic-speaking students who came to pursue their higher education was not steady. This was because of different reasons including academic, cultural, political, and sometimes social aspects (Coelho, 2004).

Studies have also reported that in any learning environment, understanding the basic needs of learners is a must (Haynes, 2007). Arabic ESL, ESP, EFL learners,

particularly, sponsored students, usually come to the U.S.A. with the expectation of having safe, supportive, and motivating environment to learn English (Shaw, 2009). The ESL, ESP, EFL teachers potentially understand their major roles towards learners of English who are non-native speakers. The only challenge that most ESL teacher encounter in creating the appropriate learning environment to their students is the lack of cultural and linguistic expectations of many foreign language learners of English including Arabs (Murray & Christison, 2011). Results from many research studies have indicated that the dearth of in-depth analysis of the language learners' cultural and linguistic feature was the major obstacle that hinder many ESL, ESP, EFL teachers to construct an active learning environment to these students (Ibrahim, Kassabgy, & Aydelott, 2000; Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2010). To bridge this gap, this study is an attempt in this direction.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

According to Anfara and Metz (2006), a theoretical framework in qualitative research helps to construct the general frame of the study, supports the formation of questions, and leads the focus of the research process and methodology. Therefore, the theoretical rationale of this study was based on the sociocultural theory which provides an explanation of the language learning process among non-native speakers of English (Lantolf, 2004; Vygotsky, 1997). According to sociocultural theory of learning, learning is partially the outcome of the learner's previous cultural, institutional, and historical contexts with their role in the mental functioning during the learning process (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2011). Sociocultural theory could help determine the social, cultural, and context challenges of Arab ESL learners, helping English teachers to construct better ways of English language teaching to these learners.

In this respect, this study was built on the paradigm of qualitative inquiry (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Merriam, 2009; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). According to Brantlinger et al., (2005), qualitative inquiry is "a systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, of a phenomenon within a particular context" (p. 195). Hence, the rationale of using qualitative methodology in this study was built on the researchers' interests of reporting the students' authentic experiences



learning and teaching English in the U.S. ESL setting.

### *3.1 Research Design and Procedures*

According to Given (2008), a qualitative exploratory design can be used when knowledge about the research group(s), activity(ies), situation(s), and process(es) is very little or not well defined. Therefore, this study was based on a qualitative-exploratory design. As shown in previous studies, there were concerns about the actual components of Arabic ESL learning essentials. Eliciting these essentials could provide ESL teachers the opportunities to frame the ultimate pedagogical and instructional constructs to teaching English to Arabic ESL learners, especially at the target levels (i.e., university).

The study used action research which involved the researchers in collecting data through authentic assessment that is also used as part of the teaching practice (Johnson, 2004). The researchers collected data from two main sources; the first, log journal to record observations and the students' comments related to the research. The students were 40 Arab ESL students in the language center which prepares the students linguistically before they start their academic students in the different universities in the US. The second source was an online survey using social networking websites as "a tool of the research" (Brickman-Bhutta, 2012, p. 1). The survey was posted on ResearchGate a website for researchers and linguists.

### *3.2 Data Analysis*

The data gathered from the log journal and the survey were all coded utilizing open coding (Boeije, 2010). Many categories emerged in the data analysis and the findings were discussed to draw conclusions and rationalize the outcomes or the results that were produced. Codes obtained from open coding led to the following seven themes: (1) Difficulty in cultural adaptation; (2) Dominance of Arabic spoken language; (3) Impact of community oriented culture; (4) Arabs learn English as a foreign language not a second language; (5) Arab students' expectations from their ESL teacher; (6) Religious and societal considerations; and (7) In-Class activities and gender considerations

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

This section discusses findings of the data gathered from the log journal and the online survey and The Findings, as

mentioned, were categorised into seven themes in the lights of the theoretical framework. These are discussed below-

### *4.1 Difficulty in Cultural Adaptation*

From the data, the cultural differences between the Arab countries and the west, i.e. occidental vs. oriental, have a noticeable impact on the Arab students' learning of English. Although Arab students are exposed to some aspects of the American culture, either through the topics studied in the books or their everyday experiences living in the US, cultural adaptation is still a main challenge to them. Arab students may need some orientation sessions to help them show mutual understanding of the cultural system and the education ethics in the country they are studying in.

### *4.2 Dominance of Arabic Spoken Language*

Arab students are influenced by their social and oral communicative style in life and this influence may impact the way they learn English. Arab students may tend to listen and talk more than to read and write. For that reason, many Arab students are better in speaking than they are in the other language skills. Thus, the dominance of spoken in Arabs' culture might affect Arab students' learning of other languages and make them pay less attention to accuracy than fluency. Moreover, Arab students may retain the Arabic oral culture features in their written expressions and the writing style in general, rather than adapting well-organized, syntactic structural style of written English (Al-Khatib et al, (n. d.); Huwari & Aziz, 2011; Khan, 2011; Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ruzic, 1983; Van De Wege, 2013).

### *4.3 Impact of Community Oriented Culture*

Arab students come from a group-oriented or community-oriented culture. On the contrary, America has individual-oriented culture. Arab learners find it unusual or anti-social to spend hours studying on their own in their rooms or in the library and that may justify the difficulty some Arab students face in the reading and writing tests. However, Asian students can sit for hours to study and that can be the reason that Asian students achieve high level of writing ability in English and low level of speaking.

### *4.4 Arabs learn English as a foreign language not a second language*

English is considered a foreign language in the Arab countries and not as a second language. It is normally taught in isolation of the language culture and context.

Moreover, the traditional ways of teaching English language leads Arab learners of English to hardship in three important skills comprehension, listening and good pronunciation for not being exposed to native speakers from early stage of learning. Moreover, spelling mistakes are ignored when English is taught in the Arab countries. That's why they argue with the teachers that spelling mistake should not be penalized in tests and exams. There should be some dictation sessions given to the students.

Another challenge in this aspect is that when Arab students read in English they might focus on learning the language while reading, which might distract their attention to the information and its comprehension. Thus, the historical, political, biological topics used in teaching reading might turn to be challenging for them.

#### *4.5 Arab Students' Expectations from their English Language Teachers*

Many Arab students prefer that teachers correct for their mistakes including pronunciation mistakes. They realize they have errors in their English and prefer to be aware of them to correct them, being taught in countries in isolation from the language environment and with minimum authentic material. Moreover, some Arab students, as well as some Asian students, may come to class with their own concept of how to get the grades. Furthermore, some Arab students are always waiting for more detailed explanation from the teacher on the grammar, sentence structure and sentence meaning. They tend to depend on the teacher, because they were taught in teacher-centered classes.

#### *4.6 Religious and Societal Considerations*

Arab students appreciate space and time for their prayers. They also appreciate the centers that would adjust the schedule to allow them free time on Friday afternoon to go and pray in the Masjid (Mosque). Many Muslim learners feel irritated for not praying in the Masjid on Fridays. Some would prefer to move from one ESL center to another for this consideration. Furthermore, Ramadan is another difficulty that Arab students face since they have to fast the whole month and keep attending classes that might be up to 5pm. In some states, the daytime hours before the students can break their fasting are too long and make studying hard for the students.

#### *4.7 In-Class Activities and Gender Considerations*

When there are pair or team activities, Arab female students prefer not to work with male students, especially for students from Saudi Arabia where they have same-gender classes in their schools and universities. These students feel embarrassed to discuss and talk about some topics in mixed-gender classes. That might be attributed to the cultural norms and the learners' needs. Thus, having both Arab males and females at the same class may affect some Arab students' education and learning of the language.

### 5. Conclusion

The study offered an overview of Arab students' some cultural challenges faced while they are studying English in the U.S.A. These challenges involve the difficulty in cultural adjustment in many aspects of the American culture in general, besides the influence of their own culture on their learning style and studying habits. The adaption to the new culture needs time and orientations from the educational institutes and universities in the US.

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that colleges and universities in the USA should have better understanding of the cultural barriers that might affect their students' academic learning. They should communicate more efficiently with the Arab students inside and outside the class rooms. Moreover, American students, staff and faculty members should also have some orientation programs for working with the Arab students to understand their culture to help them and give them enough support and guidance. However, these findings may not be generalized to all international students, since it is limited to the Arab students studying English in the USA. The study focused only on the cultural challenges and further studies are needed to explore other challenges faced by these learners.

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