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Problems Encountered by Arab EFL Learners

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on problems encountered by Arab EFL learners focusing on the many problems in English language learning and the reasons that lie behind these problems. This paper concludes that Arab EFL learners encounter many serious problems in the four language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. It also concludes that the reasons that lie behind these problems are many such as: English is not the mother tongue of the Arab EFL learners, Arab learners use Arabic as their formal language of communication, the lack of the target language exposure as spoken by its native speakers, the Arab EFL learners' preference for using Arabic in EFL classrooms rather than English, the lack and weakness of the input in their language teaching context, the lack of the Arab EFL learners' personal motivation, the inappropriateness and weakness of the English language curricula adopted by some academic institutions, etc.

Introduction

Arab countries make special efforts to facilitate the use of English language among their citizens in the present globalised era (Al- Khatib, 2000). English language started to be

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introduced in the school curriculum in most Arab countries in 1920s when most of these countries came under the British mandates. Consequently, English became a widespread language in many Arab institutions and among Arab learners. Thus, teaching English language became the main focus and interest of most Arab researchers (ibid).

For years, researchers have investigated various problems encountered by Arab EFL learners, (e. g. Mourtaga 2004; Abdul Haq 1982; Wahba 1998; Abbad 1988; Rabab'ah 2003). In addition, many studies have been conducted in Arab countries to investigate lexical, phonological, and syntactic errors made by Arab EFL learners (e.g., Abdul Haq 1982; Wahba 1998; Zughoul/Taminian 1984). Furthermore, many researchers such as: Abdul Haq (1982), Wahba (1998), and Abbad (1988), state that Arab learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to offer a better insight into the different problems encountered by Arab EFL learners.

Study of the Problems Encountered

Many researchers such as Zughoul (1983), Mukattash (1983), and Suleiman (1983) agree on some reasons which they believe to lie behind the problems encountered by Arab EFL learners while learning English. These include the lack of learners' personal motivation, the inappropriateness and weakness of the English language curricula adopted by some academic institutions, the lack of the appropriate and effective language environments, and the ineffective teaching methodology.

Two Types of Problems

Mukattash (1983:196) points out that the Arab EFL learners encounter two types of problems. The first problem is that students keep committing errors in syntax, morphology, pronunciation, and spelling. The second problem is that students are unable to express themselves "comfortably and efficiently either when dealing with 'academic topics' or 'common everyday topics. Mukattash adds that the main reason that lies behind these problems is the students' inability to use English appropriately and correctly inside and outside the classroom.

Reading Problems

One of these various problems encountered by Arab EFL learners is the reading problem. Mourtaga (2004:10) states that "Arab EFL/ESL students, including the Palestinian ones, suffer from many reading problems as a result of teachers' misunderstanding of the reading process, students' lack of the linguistic competence, differences between English and Arabic, and English spelling-pronunciation irregularities."

Spelling Problems

In her study that was conducted with 36 freshmen students majoring in translation at the College of Languages and Translation, King Saud University, Saudi Arabia, Al-Jarf (2007: 11) concludes that “The fact that English spelling is more complex than that of Arabic, this is expected to pose several spelling difficulties for Arab students particularly in the early stages of spelling development”. The reasons for such a problem, as Al-Jarf argues, are “communication breakdown, inadequate knowledge of the English spelling rules, influence of the Arabic spelling system, students' mispronunciation, interference between English words, and unfamiliarity with the American pronunciation” (ibid: 11).

Difficulty with Comprehending Natural Spoken English

Most of the Arab EFL learners are unable to fully comprehend natural spoken English delivered at normal speed. Hasan (2000) conducted a study about listening problems encountered by EFL learners at Damascus University, Syria. Besides listening problems, Hasan investigates learners' strategies, characteristics of the speaker, features of the listening text, attitudes of the listener, etc. The study concludes that EFL learners at Damascus University experience a range of listening problems.

Semantic Errors

Al-Shormani (2010) investigates semantic errors and the probable L1 and L2 sources which contribute to the committing of such errors by Arabic speaking learners of English. He says that “the sources of these errors vary between following different strategies such as translating form Arabic as in the case of some categories in *lexical choice* and *collocation* errors, applying Arabic rules to English as in *derivativeness*, the Arabic sound system as in the case of the absence of /p/ and /v/ in *distortion due to spelling* errors among others (ibid: 26).” Al-Shormani adds that it is the insufficient knowledge Arab students have about second language (L2) semantic system that makes them commit such errors.

Pronunciation Difficulties

Another problem is the pronunciation problem which is encountered by many of Arab EFL learners such as Egyptian EFL Learners. Wahba (1998) states "Egyptian students face certain problems related to pronunciation. Some of these problems are related to stress, others are related to intonation. However, most of these problems can be attributed to the differences in pronunciation between English and Arabic" (ibid: 36). Despite English being the language of instruction in most of the Egyptian universities, Egyptian colloquial Arabic is the language of choice for most Egyptian students. Students usually try to communicate in English but they always slip into Arabic (Schaub, 2000).

Learners' Compositions

In his study, Kambal (1980) analyzes errors in EFL learners' compositions. These compositions were written by first-year Sudanese University students. The study concludes that there were three types of error in the verb phrase: verb formation, tense, and subject-verb agreement made by these students.

Furthermore, Tahaineh (2010) investigate kinds of errors made by Jordanian 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year university EFL students in the use of prepositions in written composition. The study concluded that EFL Arab Jordanian students encounter serious difficulties in using the appropriate prepositions in their writing. The tested were prepositions such as: *by, in, on, to, with, of*, etc. Tahaineh says that "mother tongue interference (MTI) is a learning strategy that most foreign-language learners fall back on especially in acquisition poor classroom situations where exposure to the language is confined to a few hours per week of formal instruction. The majority of errors made by the three groups are the result of the learners' mother tongue interference as the major source (1323 errors =58%) of the total errors 2290) (ibid: 98)."

Zughoul & Taminian (1984: 4) state that "Jordanian EFL students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English." Abdul Haq (1982: 1) adds, "One of the linguistic areas in which students in the secondary cycle commit errors is in the writing skill". "There are general outcries about the continuous deterioration of the standards of English proficiency of students among school teachers, university instructors and all who are concerned with English language teaching" (ibid: 1).

In support of Abdul Haq and Zughoul & Taminians' view, Rabab'ah (2003: 63) states that "students in Jordan, for example, learn English in their home country where the native language is Arabic. The only way to learn English in Jordan is through formal instruction, i.e., in the classroom where language teachers are native speakers of Arabic. There is little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the target language which is only possible when students encounter native speakers of English who come to the country as tourists."

Lexical Errors

In his study conducted about lexical errors of foreign language learners in general and the errors of Arab learners of English in particular. Mahmoud (2005) states that Arabic-speaking students commit errors when they produce collocations in English, especially the lexical combinations. The findings show that EFL students depend on transfer from Arabic (interlingual transfer strategy) to facilitate their second language (L2) learning. Employing such a strategy causes those students to replace the Arabic words with English ones. As a result, some collocations were produced incorrectly.

Inability to Express Adequately in Native English Environment

Moreover, when studying in the English speaking countries, Arab EFL learners as non-native English speakers also face many problems. Jordan in his study (1997: 45) found the most persistent problem for the overseas students was the inability to express adequately in the spoken language. Jordan adds that the reason for such an obstacle is “due to the little time students spent in actually speaking English in a typical day”. Clennel (1999:48) also points out many of the overseas students have difficulties interacting professionally and socially with their native-speaking peers and teachers in academic context due to their insufficient knowledge of the "pragmatic content of the message". In support of Jordan and Clennel’s view, Ferris and Tagg (1996:297) add that "class participation, asking and responding to questions and general listening comprehension (as opposed to lecturer comprehension)" are the three main problematic areas.

In Other Environments

In his study that was conducted on the Arab postgraduate students at University Utara Malaysia, UUM, Al-Khasawneh, (2010) indicates that while Arab EFL postgraduate students carrying out their writing tasks, they face problems in vocabulary, grammar, organization of ideas, spelling, and referencing. Among all these problems, the major one is vocabulary. This is, as Al-Khasawneh said, “because a reasonable vocabulary size is needed for students to function effectively in their programs (ibid: 14).”

This is in line with Rabab`ah’s (2003) view that when students are engaged in authentic communicative situations, they often lack the necessary vocabulary. One of these authentic communicative situations is the writing and speaking. Thus, students will be unable to express their ideas freely because they have limited vocabulary.

Use of Arabic in the Classroom

Another significant issue related to the problems encountered by Arab EFL is the attitude of teachers and students towards using Arabic in EFL classrooms. Al-Nofaie (2010: 77) states that “the use of Arabic was an unavoidable phenomenon. The teachers’ and students’ use of Arabic appeared to be systematic, though there were a few cases in which they did not make the best use of it.

The teachers were aware of the disadvantages of the excessive use of Arabic, as their use of Arabic depended on their students’ specific needs most of the time. They preferred to use it with beginners and low achieving students to help them understand the new language.” On the other hand, Alam, *et al.* (1988) conducted a study in Saudi Arabian public schools, Saudi Arabia, in which they investigate the attitudes of teachers, students and parents towards learning English. A percentage of 32.8% of the respondents disagreed with the exclusion of Arabic in EFL classes. Furthermore, 62% of the students preferred to be taught by Arabic teachers.

Many researchers shed the light on another problem as well encountered by Arab EFL learners, which is the use of the first language (L1), i.e., Arabic, in EFL classrooms. It is noticed that many Arab EFL learners switch to their first language (L1), i.e. Arabic, in EFL classrooms. For example, the study of Kharma and Hajjaj's (1989) concludes that 81% of the Arab students prefer to use L1 in EFL classrooms, especially when they could not express their ideas in second language (L2), i.e. English. Nation (2003) adds more reasons that justify learners' use of L1. Learners tend to apply L1 either because of their shyness, lack of proficiency, or being unmotivated to communicate in L2 (ibid). Another study on using Arabic in teaching English was conducted by Al-Abdan (1993). The study revealed that 55.4% of the 451 teachers and supervisors in intermediate schools in Riyadh City who participated in the study used Arabic for 10% of the EFL class time.

In his observation about Arab EFL learners, Kandil (2002: 1) said that "Arab learners rarely have input in their language teaching context". This is because, Kandil argues, the learners' needs have not yet "received sufficient attention from researchers and language teaching professionals in the Arab World" (ibid).

Conclusion

To conclude, Arab EFL learners encounter many problems in English language learning. These problems include the four language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing. Furthermore, Arab EFL learners keep committing errors in syntax, semantics, morphology, pronunciation, and spelling. The reasons that lie behind these problems are many such as: English is not their mother tongue of the Arab EFL learners, Arab learners use Arabic as their formal language of communication, and the lack of the target language exposure as spoken by its native speakers, the Arab EFL learners' preference towards using Arabic in EFL classrooms rather than English, the lack and weakness of the input in their language teaching context, the lack of the Arab EFL learners' personal motivation, the inappropriateness and weakness of the English language curricula adopted by some academic institutions, etc. Finally, it can be noticed from the above review of studies on the problems encounter Arab EFL learners that these problems are very serious and need solutions. However, few of the conducted studies tackled these problems. The researcher suggests that further research should be carried out on this significant issue to provide taxonomy with a complete insight for each problem in order to find solutions.

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