Learning about differences

Arabic is a Semitic language and is spoken throughout the Middle East, North Africa and some African countries. Classical Arabic is the language of the Qur'an; a modern standard Arabic is used in schools, university and the mass media. Pronunciation, lexical and syntactic variations are common among the large variety of colloquial dialects that have developed in each country and consequently modern standard Arabic or English are commonly used for inter-country communication.

Pronunciation and problems that may arise for Arabic speakers learning English:

- Arabic has 28 or 29 letters depending on whether or not the hamza or glottal stop is counted as a separate letter.
- Of these 29 letters, only three are vowels – the equivalent to a long 'a', a long 'u' and a long 'i'. In total in Arabic, there are only three short vowels 'a', 'I', 'u', which are generally not written in texts, three long vowels and two diphthongs. Short vowels, when written, occur as a diagonal stroke above the consonant it follows. When no short vowel occurs after a consonant a small o occurs over the consonant indicating vowel silence. The diphthongs are 'ai'/'ay' as in 'bait' = 'house' and 'au'/ 'aw' as in 'yaum' = day.
- The English vowel system presents major problems for Arab learners of English both in terms of pronunciation and spelling. Though there are only five vowel symbols in English, there are 24 vowel sounds consisting of monothongs, diphthongs and thriphthongs. The latter two are particularly difficult for Arabic speakers as they tend to pronounce each sound as a separate vowel sound and often never master the art of elision or coalescence of the sounds. Similarly, spelling is problematic as many of the English short vowel sounds are very close e.g. 'i' and 'e', 'u' and 'a'.
- Arabic consonant sounds vary from dialect to dialect but the following problems occur for speakers from most Arabic dialects.
  - The sounds /b/ and /p/ are allophones of the same phoneme in Arabic while they are separate phonemes in English leading to words with different meanings e.g. 'big' and 'pig'.
  - The sounds /g/ and 'k' are often confused as many dialects do not have a separate /g/ phoneme.
  - Many speakers have trouble differentiating between the English 'g' and 'j' as there is no separate 'g' phoneme.
  - There is no equivalent to the 'ch' sound found in 'cheese' in English and it tends to be pronounced as 'sh'
  - There are two Arabic /h/ sounds and Arabic speakers tend to over-pronounce the English /h/
  - The /r/ sound is much stronger in Arabic and is generally over-pronounced in English.
  - Students may have difficulties hearing the difference between /t/ and /d/ even though these sounds occur in Arabic.
  - The voiced and unvoiced 'th' sounds occur in Arabic but may be pronounced as 't' in some dialects or 's' in others leading to some confusion with pronunciation and spelling of these sounds in English.
  - Consonant clusters are unusual in Arabic especially those that are longer than two consonants so Arabic speakers tend to put a short
vowel between two consonants producing sounds like sepoon for spoon, nekist for next etc.

- Arabic is a stress timed language but stress is more regular and predictable than English so it is difficult sometimes for learners to master the uncertain stress patterns of some English words.
- Writing in Arabic is from right to left and elementary learners may have trouble with the left right system in English.
- There are no capital letters in Arabic in any situation so learning the conventions of capitals can be difficult and some learners may put a capital letter in the middle of a sentence or omit them where needed.
- Letters that are somewhat similar in shape e.g. 'p', 'b', 'd' may be confused with each other. Some learners have been diagnosed as being dyslexic because of the rearranging of letters in the middle of words as in 'form' 'from' but this is more likely to occur because of the right left dichotomy.
- Punctuation system of English is more rigid than that of Arabic and learners tend to use commas in place of full stops often leading to run on sentences. There is also a tendency to write long compound sentences joined by 'and' – more a feature of spoken Arabic.

**Grammar:**
I shall just list the main points of difference here that present problems for Arabic speakers learning English and that help explain the error types we find in writing.

- Arabic has what is called a nominal sentence – equivalent to the English simple sentence constructed with the verb 'to be'. The verb 'to be' is omitted in the present simple form as in the following 'al beit jadida' = 'the house new' which in English would have to be written as 'the house is new'.
- There is one form in the present simple verb equivalent to both present simple and present progressive so learners often overuse the –ing form in English.
- There are two past forms that equate to the English past simple and past progressive but their usage is different to those of English. The past simple form is generally used to describe events that are of a punctual nature and the past progressive form to refer to events that were underway when another event happened (as in English) but the form is also used to describe habitual and repeated events.
- There is no form that equates to the English present perfect. For utterances that require the present perfect continuative as in 'I have live / have been living here for ten year' the present simple form suffices. For present perfect resultative as in 'I have just eaten' and existential 'I have visited Cairo many times' a past simple form is adequate.
- Verbs show person and therefore it is not necessary to always include the personal pronouns as is necessary in English.
- Arabic nouns are either masculine or feminine – there is no neuter gender. The gender of the noun affects the form of an accompanying adjective i.e. the adjective should be either masculine or feminine. The English pronoun 'it' takes the masculine or feminine form depending on the word it refers to.
- Adjectives follow nouns in Arabic.
- There is no one form for the plural of nouns so the English system of generally adding 's' to the singular is very straightforward for students. Nevertheless
they tend to overgeneralize and add 's' even to irregular plural nouns as 'people' and 'children'.

- Words that are collective and grammatically singular in English e.g. 'information', 'furniture', 'equipment' are plural in Arabic. The opposite can also occur – words that are collective in Arabic may not be in English.

- Words have case endings in Arabic depending on their function in a sentence. This takes the form of a change in short vowel at the end of the word referred to as nunation. This sign of indefiniteness is not always written and the ending may not be pronounced in spoken Arabic.

- There is no difference in structure between a possessive and a noun construct e.g. 'kitab aal bint' = 'the girl's book' and 'bab aal beit' = the door of the house'. Consequently students are not always able to differentiate between the two structures in English and tend to overuse the possessive form.

- Object and possessive pronouns occur as suffixes of the word they modify and their form is the same for both.

- The definite article 'aal' has less restrictions on use than the English 'the' and consequently a common mistake among Arabic writers in English is the overuse of 'the'.

- There is a symbol for indefiniteness that is not restricted by number. As with the nunation, indefiniteness is not always written or pronounced. Its effect on students' writing is either omission or overuse of 'a'/ 'an' with plural nouns.

- There is a specific question particle that is placed in front of a statement to make it a yes/ no questions or questions words equivalent to 'how' 'who' where' without any change to the word order in the original statement. Students have great difficulty with auxiliary verbs and inversion of subject

- There is a negative particle that is placed in front of the positive statement. Students have difficulty with correct auxiliary and tend to overuse 'do' as if it were a negative particle.

- Many of the Arabic modal verbs are declinable and consequently students often mark the modal with an 's' on the third person singular.

- Two verb constructs with the infinitive or −ing verb form are challenging for learners.

- Prepositions and phrasal verbs are difficult. Prepositions are so because there is no clear rule. Arabic does not have phrasal verbs.

- Questions tags in English vary according to the main verb. In Arabic there is only one tag that can be used in all situations so we get 'isn't it' all the time.

- Relative clauses differentiate along gender lines – the relative pronoun changes if the noun is masculine or feminine. However, there is no distinction between human and non-human nouns so students have difficulty with 'who' and 'which'.

- There are two Arabic particles for 'if' in conditionals that indicate how likely an event is to occur. Aspectually in Arabic, if a condition is likely to be met, the verb in the conditional clause must be in the past form indicating completion – opposite of English.

- English word form is very difficult for Arabic speakers because of the idiosyncratic nature of word building in English.