

# International Education *and* Cultural-Linguistic Experiences *of* International Students in Australia

Edited by Abe Ata & Alex Kostogriz



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**AUSTRALIANACADEMICPRESS**  
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First published 2015  
Australian Academic Press Group Pty. Ltd.  
18 Victor Russell Drive  
Samford Valley QLD 4520  
Australia  
[www.australianacademicpress.com.au](http://www.australianacademicpress.com.au)

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Title: International education and cultural-linguistic experiences  
of international students in Australia  
/ Abe Ata, Alex Kostogriz.

ISBN 9781922117465 (paperback)

ISBN 9781922117472 (ebook)

Subjects: Education, Higher--Australia.  
Education and globalization.  
Students, Foreign--Australia--Social conditions.  
International education--Australia.

Other Creators/Contributors:

Ata, Abe, editor.

Kostogriz, Alexander, editor.

Dewey Number: 378.94

Publisher: Stephen May

Copy Editor: Rhonda McPherson

Cover Designer: Maria Biaggini, The Letter Tree

Typesetting: Australian Academic Press

Printing: Lightning Source

Cover image: iStock 45115574 © nevarpp

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## Chapter 8

# Arabic Language Interferences in ESL Among International Students in Australian Language Centres

Abe W. Ata

### Introduction

Language learning is a most complex system of communication — one which triggered a large number of theories associated with various positions. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to survey these theories in a concise and clear fashion, their contribution is not to be dismissed. Knowledge about these theories, estimated to be in excess of 20, will help us to understand and explain better how learners of L2 succeed or fail; the subtleties of intercultural communication; the variation between language and meaning; differences of learning between individuals and the relationship between them. A clear comprehensive view of these and other roles such as the functionalist, pragmatic, cognitive, social are found in the work by Mitchell and Miles (2004); Herschensohn & Young-Scholten (2013); Cook (2013); and Doughty (2003).

Language acquisition, often considered an act of mere imitation and memorisation, is, in fact, a very complex activity. Scholars in the field, led by Krashen in the 1980s, made a subtle distinction between *acquisition* and *learning*. They propose that the former is both subconscious and anxiety free; that is, when a child constructs a grammar of his/her native language by listening to linguistic data and forming generalisations which come to function unconsciously and automatically, as grammatical rules for the language. To extend this point to a classroom setting, this 'natural' approach emphasises communication, and places decreased importance on conscious study of grammar and explicit correction of student errors (Krashen and Terrell, 1983). The fact that a child produces unacceptable forms such as 'foots' for 'feet' and 'goed' for 'went', which he cannot have learnt by imitation, means that he is involved in a complex activity of hypothesis verification. At a later stage, when the child discovers by further observation and socialisation by others as the child participates in discourses in one's native

language that his or her rules for forming the plural and the past are too general he/she modifies them to account for irregularities.

By contrast, it is suggested that learning is a conscious effort; that is when a child studies and practices what the learner needs and wants and what is perceived as relevant.

In this regards Harmer (2011) says that the language that is learnt tends 'to get in the way' of the how the acquired-language production and may inhibit spontaneous communication ; and that one is to keep monitoring from the acquired language store that what is coming from it is 'O K' (Harmer, (2011, p. 47).

Having said that, the link between attitudes and language acquisition was found to be so strong that they way learners attitudinal leanings; that is, how they feel about language, and teacher's largely determines a successful acquisition and performance. Subsequently, one could assume that if second language learners initiate their language learning while they have negative attitudes towards the target language and the people using that language, they are not expected to make considerable progress in their process of language learning. This assumption was held as far back as 1995 when Truitt (1995) hypothesised that students' beliefs and attitudes about language learning may vary based on cultural background and previous experiences. Thus, it can be argued that positive or negative attitudes do not develop accidentally but have some reasons for their emergence. Malallaha (2000) investigated the attitudes of Arab learners towards English and discovered that they have positive attitudes toward the English language and their proficiency in tests was positively related to their positive attitude to English. Hence, it can be argued that having positive or negative attitudes towards a certain language can exert considerable effect on the learners' performance on a language test.

Several linguists proposed the idea that the transfer implies a process in which the learner tends to assume that the system of L2 is more or less the same as his/her L1, until the learner discovers that it is not. In other words the learner senses or assumes that there is some kind of influence on the transfer of language for it to actually happen. In other words, one's native language influences the language being studied, with the result being one of transfer. If a skill is transferred from the L1 results in production that is different from target language expectation (L2) it is called negative; and when the skills leads to a smoother transfer it is called positive. (Odlin, 2005; Allard, Bourdeau, & Mizoguchi, 2011).

The same process of hypothesising and rule formation is employed in acquiring a second language. However, for reasons not completely understood, the capacity for language acquisition diminishes with age. It is generally recognised that a learner commencing second language acquisition

after puberty will be unlikely to achieve native competency in the second language. It is also recognised adult second language learners can learn a second language at a fast rate initially by utilising knowledge of their first languages, and by the same token knowledge of their first language is a source of interference. This change constitutes a handicap against the learner who is often exposed to his second language, under artificial situations in the classroom, years after he has gained control of the system of his first language. The learner of a second language also has an added complication in the form of interference from the system of his native language which has been internalised. It is this type of interference which is at the source of recurring and stubborn structures in the English of Arab students.

With this brief description, one might attempt to explain the errors that a native speaker of Arabic makes when speaking or writing in English. Naturally, one finds errors such as misspellings, mispronunciations and grammatical usages which are not the result of Arabic interference. Such errors are due to improper generalisations or insufficient exposure, and are also made by speakers of languages other than Arabic. By and large, the majority of the errors analysed is lexical and grammatical.

First language interference, which varies in degree with the individual's incompetence in his second language, is manifested at all levels of linguistic structure. Even though the number and nature of linguistic levels is subject for argument, one might assume the existence of the following levels:

- (a) phonological
- (b) grammatical
- (c) semantic
- (d) stylistic.

Each of these will be discussed separately, keeping in mind that the separation is artificial and solely intended to facilitate the analysis.

### ***Methodological design and data analysis***

The sampling method involved the selection of 90 Arabic speaking candidates drawn at random from Monash, Melbourne RMIT and Deakin University language centres. (These centres have a large cluster of Arabic speaking students who are funded by their governments including Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, Kuwait and Libya to study English prior to, and as required by these universities, to enrol in a future graduate or postgraduate degrees.

A structured questionnaire was administered to these students consisting of pre and post International English Language Testing System (IELTS) candidates to collect data on their knowledge and attitudes to IELTS. The ques-

tionnaire was designed largely to elicit responses as to why Arabic speakers of English formulate incorrect parts of speech in writing, and under what conditions. What kinds of grammatical, phonological, semantic and stylistic interferences exist between English and Arabic including intonation, stress, and rhythm features; and the manner in which contrastive features cause semantic confusion and unintentionally triggered responses.

The second task involved participants to write an essay of their choice on a select subject that are interested in writing. Participants who completed this task early were asked individually to read a paragraph from their essay. This was recorded so as to capture the sound segments for further phonological analysis.

Analysis of findings in this paper is largely qualitative and is based solely on the second task. Administration of the questionnaire was completed over a period of 8 weeks.

#### **(a) Phonological interference**

Each language has its own inventory of sound segments — consonants and vowels, which are combined, according to systematic patterns, to form syllables and words. In addition, a language has ‘supra-segmental’ features (e.g., stress and rhythm) which superimpose on the segmental sounds. By comparing these phonological aspects in English and Arabic, it is possible to identify the problems which the speaker of one of these languages will face in learning the other. In English, for instance, there is no sound which is equivalent to the Arabic /  $\wedge$  /; and consequently, a native speaker of English will substitute for this sound the closest sound available in his language which is /a/.

The Arabic speaker learning English will have to deal with a number of distinctions which Arabic does not employ in its system of segmental sounds. Thus, the most common mispronunciations involve the following distinctions /p-b/, /f-v/, /k-g/, the vowel sounds in ‘boat’ vs ‘bought’, and the vowel sound in ‘nut’ vs ‘not’. Other problems are caused by the sounds represented by the italicised letters in thin, then, thing, and by the different phonetic quality of English and Arabic /t/ Idl/ Irl/ and /i/. Even though these problems are mainly manifested in speech, they are sometimes transferred into writing as shown by the examples below. These were drawn from the essays which were written by the participants of this study:

1. He brayed to the God for merci.
2. I did not bitch well in my baseball game.
3. I was advised not to put my eggs in one pasket.
4. My father infested 1200 dollars in the bank.
5. We may pull Shakespeare out of his crave.

6. Ulysis was bold in battle.
7. Jonson was too fund of Shakespeare.

Example number 3 poses an interesting question as to the reason behind writing and pronouncing the word 'basket' as 'pasket', when the speaker is expected to do the exact opposite. The answer lies in the fact that this student, after being repeatedly corrected for substituting *l* for *p*, is unconsciously using this information in inappropriate situations in an effort to be correct. This process is known as hyper-correction.

Another possible source of interference is the pattern according to which syllables are formed. When an Arabic student pronounces 'springe' 'sipring' or 'spiring', it is because Arabic generally does not allow for a cluster of three consonants in one syllable. However, contrary to English, Arabic does allow for a sequence of two identical consonants. Hence an Arabic speaker often pronounces the double consonants in words such as 'appointment', 'account', 'arrest', and 'umbrella'.

The supra-segmental features of a foreign language are probably the most difficult to learn and they are often the clues that betray a foreign accent. In fact many people who have mastered these segmental sounds of English run into some difficulty with rhythm, pitch and stress. To compare and contrast the supra-segmental feature; Arabic and English is a task which is beyond scope of the present discussion. Some examples of stress patterns, however, should clarify point. The word 'dictionary', which has a primary stress on the first syllable, is often pronounced 'dictionary', with stress on the second syllable. The wrong placement of stress is clearly due to interference from the Arabic stress pattern of words such as *madrasati* (my school), which contains same number and type of syllables as in 'dictionary'. Other common examples are 'develo'pment' for 'deve'lopment', which is analogous with *saala'thum* (she asked them), and 'seco'ndary' for 'se'condary', which is analogous with *sa'altani* (you asked me).

#### **(b) Grammatical interference**

Grammatical interference from Arabic to English is undoubtedly one of the main factors contributing to the high consumption of aspirin among teachers of English as a second language. The result of such interference is often manifested in unintelligibility, ambiguity or unintended meanings. But even when the meaning is clear, it is difficult to get at because of the foreign structure that carries it. One source of challenges for learners is grammatical construction; that is the syntactic string of words ranging from sentences over phrasal structures to certain complex lexemes, such as phrasal verbs. Here, grammatical construction differs in a number of respects from Arabic to English. Here are some examples:

1. There is a large school consists of nine buildings.
2. Freedom is a meaningful term cannot be understood.
3. I did not read the book which I borrowed it from you yet.
4. He wrote a brilliant way which he reached the top by it.
5. It is a play about a man which pretends to be dying from hunger.
6. But Satan who God postponed his punishment, was very rebellious.

If translated verbatim into Arabic, the above sentences could be perfectly grammatical.

They illustrate four points of interference from the grammatical rules which govern the relative construction in Arabic:

- i) Sentences 8 and 9 follow the Arabic rule which requires the absence of a relative pronoun just in case the noun modified by a relative clause is indefinite (e.g. *madrasatun,tata'llafu min ...* vs *al-madrasatu llati tata'allaju min ...*).
- ii) Sentences 10 and 11 are the result of applying an Arabic rule which requires that an object pronoun referring to the modified noun be included in the relative clause (e.g., *alkitaatuu lladhi ak-kadhtuhu ... tariigatum wa sla biha*).
- iii) Sentence 12 shows that the distinction in English between the human and non-human forms of relative pronouns (who-which) has no equivalent in Arabic. Hence, the two forms are sometimes used interchangeably.
- iv) Sentence 13 is the direct transfer of an Arabic structure functioning as a substitute for an English structure (possessive form of the relative pronoun) which has no equivalent in Arabic (e.g., *Ashashaytaamu lladhi ajjala llaahu ga saa sahu*).

Another major area of interference is detected in the verb system — particularly with regard to agreement of tenses, agreement between subject and verb, infinitive forms, and improper use of tense. The examples below will hopefully illustrate these points without subjecting the reader to any further grammatical jargon. Arabic speakers will no doubt be able to identify the source of these problems by translating the sentences into Arabic:

1. He looked to the people as if they are beasts.
2. We hear Jonson says, 'men fear death'.
3. He signed a paper which let Shylock to take one kilo of Antonio's flesh.
4. We must to learn in order to succeed.
5. He asked people to don't fear death.
6. He told his wife that he has not eaten since two days.
7. Several of these problems has no solution.



8. In Spencer's poems we notice it deals with human nature.
9. I cut my hair (meaning: I had my hair cut).

Other common errors, though not restricted to Arabic speakers, are to be found in verb-adverbial combinations such as 'turn off', 'turn out', 'turn in', 'turn up', 'turn down', and so on. Such distinctions, which have no corresponding forms in Arabic, seem to be difficult to learn. Thus, we often find people 'filling up' application forms, but 'filling in' glasses; 'wiping out' baby's face, and 'wiping' the water on the floor, 'picking out' garbage, and 'picking up' a nice colour. The writers of the two sentences below intended to use 'take off' in examples 1 and 2, below:

1. He took out his shoes to rest his feet.
2. A good teacher should rub what he writes on the board before he leaves the class.

The use of prepositions (almost all of them) is a particularly difficult aspect of second language hearing. The problems which stem from first language interference from the later sentence examples are:

- the addition of a preposition where it is not needed (e.g., sentence 3)
- the election of a necessary preposition (e.g., sentence 10)
- the use of the wrong preposition (e.g., sentence 5).

1. I met with a pretty girl on my way to the school.
2. I am in favour with his ideas.
3. I chose science because it concerns with the mind.
4. He got married from a woman older from him.
5. He was angry from his wife.
6. I paid to him five pounds and thanked him.
7. Let me do to you a favour.
8. I'll try to reach to my aim.
9. I left to Beirut by the plane.
10. I went to London after noon.
11. I agree with George for how he looks to the freedom.
12. Most of the writers in that time admired him.
13. I am responsible about my actions.
14. He did it by his own.

The remaining examples in this section illustrate the problems with the verb 'to be' (1–3); indirect questions (4 and 5); the distinction between 'too' and 'very' (6), the distinction between 'for' and 'since' (7), and the use of the article (8 and 9).

1. He lyrics can sung be the people today.
2. This literary creation worth reading.
3. He is will succeed in all his life.
4. I don't remember how many plays did Shakespear write.
5. It is difficult to ask what is literature.
6. His children were too happy when he returned.
7. She didn't see her husband since 3 years.
8. A poet must admire the beauty.
9. George also wrote poem.

### **(c) Semantic interference**

The most striking instances of semantic interference are likely to be found in idiomatic usages and in common and useful expressions such as greetings. The use of 'welcome' as an initial greeting corresponds to the use of *ahlan* in Arabic. The answer to 'How are you?' is often 'thank God'. 'How much is your age?' has been for 'How old are you?' and 'How much your watch?' for 'What time do you have?' The list of such errors is inexhaustible.

Another instance of semantic interference involves the use of a word in an inappropriate context which usually requires a different word with a similar meaning. This often happens when two or more words in English correspond (at least in the mind of the individual) to one word in Arabic, thus obscuring some meaning distinctions. Examples of this nature (1–9) includes sets of words such as 'do-make', 'shallow-superficial', 'steal-rob', 'agree-approve', and so on, and so on.

1. Everyone does mistakes because nobody perfect.
2. He was capable of making the job.
3. Most of the lakes in Lebanon are superficial.
4. The carpenter worked a nice table for her.
5. He saw a person stealing a shop.
6. We don't approve with him about the things which he said it.
7. John shows how God made the world in six days and then he retired.
8. We can take many informations from it about the human beings.
9. If someone speak something wrong, he feels sorry.

The use of malapropisms (mistaking one word for another) is not specifically an Arabic interference problem. Nevertheless, it is quite common, as suggested by the following examples:

1. Shakespeare's plays are still wildly read.
2. Julius Caesar is a hysterical drama.

3. The play is empty from the feminine sect.
4. Swift wrote 'Tales of a Tub' which is a satire about religious sex.
5. Thomas Gray wrote the Alergy in a country church yard.
6. Wordsworth wrote 'Immitations of Immorality'.
7. Another reason for the decline of the medieval church was the immorality of the clergymen.
8. I plan to study petroleom theology in the Australia.
9. Nearly every religion has been connected with a profit.

Examples of incorrect word form are:

- he wants to get marriage
- a famous musician band
- his economical problems
- it was a failure marriage;

and of incorrect context:

- bring a boy (= give birth to a boy)
- lose dignity (= lose virginity)
- finish business (= do business)
- carrying her baby (= pregnant with her baby);

and of incorrect choice of words:

- repair his mistake
- Al-Qaidah arrangement
- pray the prayers
- work your work
- destroyed houses (= broken homes)
- hurts the mind (= harms the brain).

#### **(d) Stylistic interference**

One may master the grammatical and semantic systems of a foreign language, yet fall into the stylistic trap of the first language. The type of interference is quite apparent in the English of many Arabic speakers for whom the distinction between descriptive and creative writing is non-existent. Consequently, poetic elements and flowery expressions find their way into letters and composition papers, with effects ranging between the humorous and the pathetic. The samples below are taken from a composition paper (1), and application form for an MA program (2), and a letter to the editor of a TESL magazine (3):

1. Is there something its beauty more than love? No and a thousand times, no.

2. In the absence of enlightenment in our Arab world and due to the lackness of knowledge and justice, one can't stumble on a torch to scatter the arrows of darkness better than education.

3. Dear the editor,

I can't say what I felt when our darling 'ESL' came at my hand, I came at the highest of my spirits and soon began to swallow what is richly and cleverly put down on 'her' ...

Again I hope I could continue to be one of your forever friends; and 'ESL' would get more success and prosperity; with my dearest wishes and greetings. Thanks very much again.

### Conclusive summary

This chapter aims at addressing the problem of cultural and Arabic language interference and we would be able then to build an instructional system to help students overcome these patterns of errors which precipitate in the acquisition English.

Several broad and detailed learning difficulties and analysis of underlying concept difficulties were presented — both for teachers to create new cultural aware teaching scenarios, and students to understand and interpret them as they are required to demonstrate higher levels of English proficiency.

Several implications arise in presenting the various categories of classic errors encountered through second language learning as in the case of Arabic-English. A key one is to provide a 'culturally-aware' education (see also, Blanchard & Allard 2010). This kind of direction may provide a stronger case for education that is responsive to cultural and linguistic differences. In this regard, the starting point of such responsiveness is not much a deficit view of international students but rather an understanding of linguistic/cultural origins of difference. Errors then can be perceived differently and work can be done in the space inter-language — an interim language system which is attributed to Larry Selinker (see also Van Patten & Benati, 2010).

The principle behind inter-language theory is that the language of second-language learners is governed by systematic rules as in any other language, and that these rules are different from those of the language being learned and from those of the learner's native language. Hence at every stage of learning, language learners do not merely copy what native speakers do, but create an entirely new language system unique to themselves. Selinker (1972) proposed then that inter-language is based on three basic principles: (a) over-generalisation from patterns found in the language being learned; (b) transfer from patterns found in the learner's native language, and (c) fossilisation, the phenomenon of a learner's language ceasing to develop (Van Patten & Benati, 2010).

The focus on learner errors is arguably useful to language teachers as a means of enhancing teaching methodology, with the caution that teachers avoid overgeneralisation and the search for a unitary source of an error. An awareness of the types of errors Arabic speakers tend to commit is necessary for language teachers so that they are able to properly and timely correct inappropriate and unacceptable utterances.

Finally, whether one reacts to errors of linguistic interference with laughter or with dismay, one must never be unsympathetic. Such errors should be viewed not as a result of stupidity, but rather a natural consequence of the interaction between two extremely complex linguistic systems. Some errors, though, defy linguistic analysis and can only be attributed to individual genius: for instance, the statement of an English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) postgraduate student, who said he had read with great interest 'The Rape of the Pope' by Alexander Locke.

Learning and teaching a second language are activities which require a lot of time and effort, and, above all, a good sense of humour.

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