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ABSTRACT

Cultural and linguistic information useful to  
 teachers of native Arabic-speakers in English as a Second Language  
 (ESL) and bilingual education is offered. This includes background  
 information on geographic, political, religious, and ethnic  
 divisions, stereotypes commonly held by Arabs about Americans and  
 American society, common stereotypes about Arabs, some Arab  
 contributions to world culture, the role of Arabic and other  
 languages in the Arab culture, and salient differences between Arabic  
 and English, both linguistic and sociolinguistic. A brief  
 bibliography is provided, and charts of the Arabic alphabet,  
 according to position within words, are appended. (MSE)

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# Teaching English to Arabic-Speaking Students: Cultural and Linguistic Considerations

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# TEACHING ENGLISH TO ARABIC-SPEAKING STUDENTS: CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

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## Abstract

Given the rapidly increasing number of Arabic-speaking students in U.S. public schools, English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual teachers need to be cognizant of sociolinguistic, historical and cultural considerations affecting the educational needs of these students and their families. This paper provides relevant information which will assist teachers to develop sensitivity and understanding of this unique language-minority population. The authors hope that this material will help teachers better determine how to structure the curriculum, pinpoint transfer pitfalls between English and Arabic, enhance students' social integration and accelerate their acquisition of English.

One of the regions of the world most affected by political unrest and turmoil is the Middle East. The increasing population of Arabic-speaking students in the American schools has become a reality that merits attention. The purpose of this paper is to share cultural and linguistic information with bilingual and ESL teachers to enable them to promote intercultural understanding and facilitate the acquisition of English as a second language.

## Establishing Rapport

Arabs live within the borders of over twenty nations throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. Nevertheless, "to avoid offending many Arabs, [teachers] would be prudent to use the singular 'Arab nation' instead of the plural 'Arab nations' in [their] conversations with the Arabs" (Almaney & Alwan, 1982, p. 33) in acknowledgement of their shared language, religion and culture. Although 90 percent of the more than 160 million Arabic-speakers in the region are Muslim, there are also many Arab Jews and Christians (Al-Qazzaz et al, 1978; Denny, 1987). Minorities are identified by either religion or language. Some examples of non-Arabs are Kurds, Druze, Copts, Armenians, Assyrians, and Berbers (Butt, 1987).

Although recent immigrants tend to settle in established communities in states such as California, Michigan, New York, New Jersey, and Texas, they are also finding their way to other areas of the country (Abraham & Abraham, 1983). Teachers wishing to establish positive intercultural relations with recently arrived students and their families must become sensitized to the diversity of the people and their histories. Therefore, ESL and bilingual teachers should not make any assumptions about the preconceived ideas of their students and families. Just as Americans may have developed false images of Arabs because of media-hype and lack of first-hand knowledge, Arabs have also fallen victims of stereotyping. Both Arabs and Americans view each other through

their own cultural filters. To promote positive human relations, teachers should make every effort to obtain accurate information. When in doubt, the best advice is to be an open-minded listener: empathetic and sympathetic (Almaney & Alwan, 1982).

### Common Stereotypes

Based upon hundreds of personal experiences and interactions with Arab immigrants from across the United States over the past five years, the following stereotypes about American society surfaced as the most common:

1. All Americans are rich. They may not know about the homeless in America or about the ghettos.
2. Americans are mostly white, Christian, and speak English. They may be ignorant of minority groups and their historical struggle.
3. Americans have lax moral standards. They believe that in America, anything goes. Interpreted as proof are dating at a young age, teenage pregnancy, liberal dress codes, drinking, and going to bars and clubs.

On the other hand, common notions about Arabs reinforce a picture of a male dominated society, wealthy sheiks in long robes, fanatic fundamentalists, and more recently, "terrorists" (Almaney & Alwan, 1982). By emphasizing positive cultural aspects and contributions to world civilizations, teachers can diffuse the effects of such unfavorable images thrust upon an uninformed public.

Some facts that could yield more objectivity toward Arabs include the following: (a) Arab civilization introduced ancient Greek learning to the West through the preservation and translation of original Greek, Persian, Sanskrit, and Syriac manuscripts (Al-Qazzaz, et al, 1978); and (b) Arabs can be credited with innovations in medicine, architecture, mathematics, astronomy, geography and in other disciplines (Fix, 1981).

### The Arabic Language

There is great pride and prestige associated with the Arabic language. "Arabic is the language of one of the world's great civilizations, and one to which the West has been profoundly indebted for over a millennium in fields as diverse as mathematics, chemistry, geography, and philosophy." (Starr, 1990, p. B2). Not only is it the language of the Holy Koran, but it is a language which enjoys wide usage in the creation of great literature and poetry, as well as having influenced Spanish greatly through 700 years of presence in Spain (Monroe, 1970, 1976). One example of the love and respect for the written word was the care and attention given to libraries during the Arab period in Spain. In one of Cordobas 70 libraries, for example, 400,000 books were collected ( Al-Qazzaz et al, 1978).

Geographic proximity allows for the common bond of language to remain strong despite variations in the spoken language among people of varying regions and nationalities. Children commonly grow up with a sense of bilingualism in that they are aware of these regional dialectical differences and how the standard written forms differ from their spoken dialects ( Al-Batal, 1988). This experience with Arabic can be helpful as students are introduced to English.

### How Arabic and English Differ

Arabic is different from English in many ways. Problems ranging from phonological to morphological and structural difficulties that face Arabic speaking students while learning English have been well-documented (Zughoul, 1979; Mitleb, 1982, 1985; Ibrahim, 1977, 1978; Suleiman, 1987). There are unique aspects of the Arabic language which pose special transfer problems with English which have pedagogical implications for ESL teaching and curriculum design (Thomson-Panos & Thomas-Ruzic, 1983).

When teaching English to Arabic-speakers some linguistic considerations should be kept in mind:

First, the writing system goes from right to left. The way the letters are written depends upon their position in Arabic words (see Appendix). The orthographies of both languages are different and tend to pose difficulty in pronunciation and spelling (Ibrahim, 1977, 1978). Some sounds in English do not exist in Arabic: an example is the substitution of the "b" for a "p" ("beople" ... "compination"). Arabic does not have two distinctive bilabial plosives, only the voiced /b/ and hypercorrected spelling that represents both "b" and "p" as "p". There are no written vowels. Diacritics are used instead to indicate vowels.

Second, recognizing syntactic differences between English and Arabic can guide ESL teachers and help them deal with transfer problems effectively (Yorkey, 1977). ESL teachers should train their students to make linguistic adjustments when learning English. For example, they should make it clear that word order (*e.g. Dead Sea vs. \*Sea Dead*), language typology (*e.g. Ali goes to school vs. \*goes Ali to school*), structural patterns (*e.g. that's the teacher whom I met vs. \*That the teacher whom I met him*) ... are different in both languages.

Most importantly, the sociolinguistic aspects of Arabic differ from those of English. Some of these features usually transfer to English in an inappropriate manner. For example, the depth of questioning about family affairs, health, and other private matters are culturally incompatible. Jokes are also culture-bound; what is humorous to an Arab might be outrageous to an American and vice versa.

Finally, written discourse of Arab ESL learners is dependent on the Arabic logic and cultural thought patterns. The rhetoric of a tightly organized, logical presentation of ideas is as foreign to Arab students as English itself (Yorkey, 1977). On the other hand, English rhetoric is often construed as cold and highly impersonal rather than embellished as is the elite style of literary Arabic.

### Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide some important cultural and linguistic information about Arabic-speakers which hopefully, will assist teachers to have a point of departure from which to understand their students and their families. By providing relevant cultural information, teachers can better determine how to structure the curriculum to include these students in every aspect of the school's life. Similarly, with linguistic knowledge teachers can pinpoint and deal with transfer pitfalls between English and Arabic to accelerate the acquisition of English and to encourage the maintenance of Arabic.

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Appendix

The Arabic Alphabet According to Position in Words

BEGINNING

ا	ب	ت	ث	ج
ح	خ	د	ذ	ر
ز	س	ش	ص	ض
ط	ظ	ع	غ	ف
ق	ك	ل	م	ن
هـ	و	ي		

MIDDLE

ا	ب	ت	ث	ج
ح	خ	د	ذ	ر
ز	س	ش	ص	ض
ط	ظ	ع	غ	ف
ق	ك	ل	م	ن
هـ	و	ي		

END

ا	ب	ت	ث	ج
ح	خ	د	ذ	ر
ز	س	ش	ص	ض
ط	ظ	ع	غ	ف
ق	ك	ل	م	ن
هـ	و	ي		