The Differences Between English and Arabic

Introduction: Arabic is the official language in many countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Morocco. Arabic is also the language of the Koran, so Muslims of all nationalities, such as Indonesians, are familiar with it. There are many Arabic dialects, but there is one version that is taught in schools and used by the media across the Arab world. Arabic is from the Semitic language family, hence its grammar is very different from English. There is a large potential for errors of interference when Arab learners produce written or spoken English. Arabic has a three consonant root as its basis. All words (parts of speech) are formed by combining the three-root consonants with fixed vowel patterns and, sometimes, an affix. Arab learners may be confused by the lack of patterns in English that would allow them to distinguish nouns from verbs or adjectives, etc.

Alphabet: Arabic has 28 consonants (English 24) and 8 vowels/diphthongs (English 22). Short vowels are unimportant in Arabic, and indeed do not appear in writing. Texts are read from right to left and written in a cursive script. No distinction is made between upper and lower case, and the rules for punctuation are much looser than in English. Unsurprisingly, these fundamental differences between the Arabic and English writing systems cause Arab learners significant problems. They usually need much more time to read or write than their English-learning peers from the Indo-European language families.

Phonology: English has about three times as many vowel sounds as Arabic, so it is inevitable that beginning learners will fail to distinguish between some of the words they hear, such as ship / sheep or bad / bed, and will have difficulties saying such words correctly. Problems in pronouncing consonants include the inability to produce the th sounds in words such as this and thin, the swapping of /b/ and /p/ at the beginning of words, and the subsitution of /f/ for /v/. Consonant clusters, such as in the words split, threw or lengths, also cause problems and oten result in the speaker adding an extra vowel: spilit, ithrew or lengthes. In Arabic word stress is regular. It is common, therefore, for Arab learners to have difficulties with the seemingly random nature of English stress patterns. For example, the word yesterday is stressed on the first syllable and tomorrow on the second. The elision (or swallowing) of sounds that is so common in spoken English is problematic for Arab speakers, and they will often resist it. (Consider, for example, how the questions What did you do? or Do you know her? are said in conversational English: Whatcha do? / Jew know her?) This aversion to elision and the use of glottal stops before initial vowels are the primary

reasons for the typical staccato quality of the spoken English of Arab learners.

Grammar – Verb/Tense: Arabic has no verb to be in the present tense, and no auxiliary do. Furthermore, there is a single present tense in Arabic, as compared to English, which has the simple and continuous forms. These differences result in errors such as She good teacher, When you come to Germany?, I flying to Egypt tomorrow or Where he going?

Arabic does not make the distinction between actions completed in the past with and without a connection to the present. This leads to failure to use the present perfect tense, as in I finished my work. Can you check it?

There are no modal verbs in Arabic. This, for example, leads to: From the possible that I am late. (I may be late.) Another common mistake is to infer that an auxiliary is needed and make mistakes such as: Do I must do that?

Grammar – Other: The indefinite article does not exist in Arabic, leading to its omission when English requires it. There is a definite article but its use is not identical with the use of the definite article in English. In particular, Arab learners have problems with genitive constructions such as the boy's dog. In Arabic this would be expressed as Dog the boy, which is how such constructions may be conveyed into English.

Adjectives in Arabic follow the noun they qualify. This leads Arab beginners to making word order mistakes in written or spoken English.

Arabic requires the inclusion of the pronoun in relative clauses, unlike English, in which the pronoun is omitted. This results in mistakes like: Where is the pen which I gave it to you yesterday?

Vocabulary: There are very few English/Arabic cognates. This significantly increases a.) the difficulties they have in comprehending what they hear and read, and b.) the effort they must make to acquire a strong English word store.