RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHALLENGES FACED BY EFL TEACHERS WHILE TEACHING ARAB STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

We would like to present few challenges that we have faced in teaching Arab students and also would like to discuss few solutions that we have implemented in our classes and have found them to be effective. We presume that our observations and recommendations would serve to be an effective support to EFL teachers dealing with students of similar background.

Firstly, we would like to discuss a few issues which make learning of English a difficult task to Arab students, because understanding student's problems would help us understand our challenges better. We would like to deal with pronunciation, vocabulary and spelling issues.

Secondly, we would like to focus on how these issues pose as a challenge to teachers of English, especially to the teachers at tertiary level who have to impart a higher level of syllabus to a set of students, who are technically nothing but beginners.

Finally, we would like to deal with few techniques that we have tried and tested in class through which have helped our students to approach the language in an effective manner. Though these techniques are simple and in nature but we feel that by sharing this knowledge, many teachers will benefit through the methods prescribed in this paper in helping the target audience.

Keywords: EFL, Language acquisition, Classroom interaction, Games and Methodologies., 2016

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language acquisition deals with two types of learning. On the one hand, J. Cummins argues that a set of metalinguistic knowledge from the first language certainly influences the second language acquisition. On the other hand, S. Krashen explains that there are two independent systems which influence the second language learning. He calls them the acquired system and the learned system. The acquired system is responsible for producing subconscious processes without paying attention to form, whereas learned system is acquisition of language resulting from prolonged and extensive exposure to meaningful interactions in that particular language. When this exposure is minimal the problem of acquired system dominating the learning process becomes acute. This exactly is the main problem faced by Arab students who want to learn English.

One of us is a lecturer in College of Technology and the other a lecturer in Vocational Training Centre, through our discussions we realized

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that we were facing similar situations and problems in teaching English. The main problem being the level of fluency of our students. When we first started as teachers to Arab students the fact that most amazed us was that all the students had at least a minimum of 10 years training in English, in spite of which they were still in the beginner's stage. This prompted us to find out the reasons behind the impediments in learning English. We decided to elicit some information from our students based on our observations, which would take us to the root of the issue. We prepared a questionnaire which dealt with all the major problems in their learning process. The idea was to find out why there was an absolute mismatch between the number of years of training and their level of fluency. We used 101 students as our sample population and did our questionnaire. The questionnaire not only gave us an insight into the problems it also came up with lot of interesting findings.

Arab learners of English face problems with both the skills, speaking and writing. Any language acquisition is based on how much we listen and read in that given language. Like we acquire our mother tongue through listening and speaking, initially imitating sounds moving on to words and sentences as infants. Reading and writing comes later when we attend school. But second language or foreign language acquisition always begins after a learner goes to school and starts with reading and writing; listening and speaking always take a back seat or rather not present at all. This situation is rather predominant in Arab countries since English is not used anywhere in their day to day affairs. A language has to be learnt in a formal controlled environment that is the class room. Most of the Arabic speaking teachers converse in the local language curtailing all possibilities of helping the students to acquire a foreign language. Actually, they indulge in Arabic to use it as a scaffolding technique but most of the time they get carried away and tend to continue with Arabic. First language should be used sparingly to explain a foreign language because the difficulties the learner endures in exploring the spelling, pronunciation, meaning and usage, in a way helps them to remember, learn and practice the same. Which is

similar to the struggle of a butterfly that wrestles it way out of the cocoon and by doing so strength its wings for perpetual flying experience.

Data Analysis: Our first question to the students was how many years of training they had in learning English, 93 students had between 11 to 15 years of training and 8 students had between 8 to 10 years of training. A staggering number of years, given the fact that, without exaggeration, we start right from teaching alphabet. 70 students out of 101 stated that their teachers taught them English using Arabic. We agree that Grammar Translation Method is important in teaching foreign languages, unlike most teachers who talk about it as a thing of the past and a totally outdated method of teaching. But here we have evidence that this method alone is not beneficial for the students who lose the opportunity to listen to English in the only place where it is possible, i.e. the classroom.
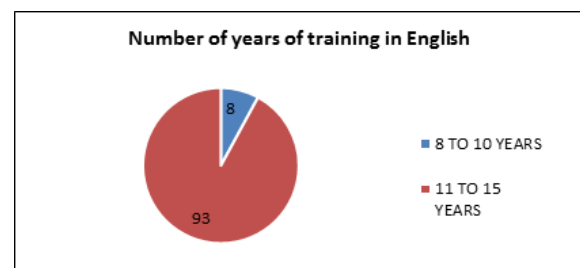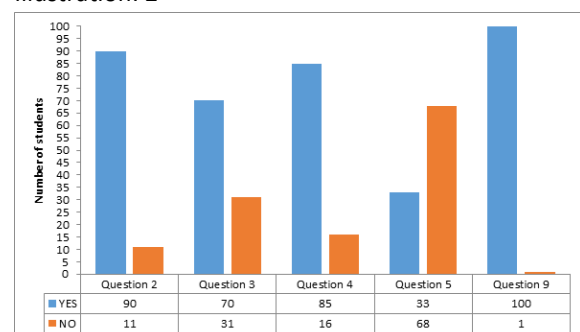
Illustration: 1

Illustration: 2

	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5	Question 9
YES	90	70	85	33	100
NO	11	31	16	68	1

Question 2: Were your teachers Arabic speakers?

Question 3: If Yes, did they use Arabic to teach English?

Question4: Do you practice Listening/ Speaking/ Reading/Writing in the class in English?

Question 5: Have you ever practiced English outside your class?

Question 9: Do you think English is important for your career growth?

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When probed about practicing English inside and outside the classroom, 85 students said that they do practice inside the classroom, but that usually was restricted to talking to the teacher, especially if he/she happens to be a non-Arabic speaking teacher, within themselves the students still converse in Arabic. Only 35 students out of 101 said that they speak in English with people outside the class, the majority being their friends, 19 said that they speak in English with friends, 9 with relatives and 7 with family members. That is a very negligible number when compared to the sample size. This shows that the opportunity for them to practice English inside or outside the classroom is rather minimal.
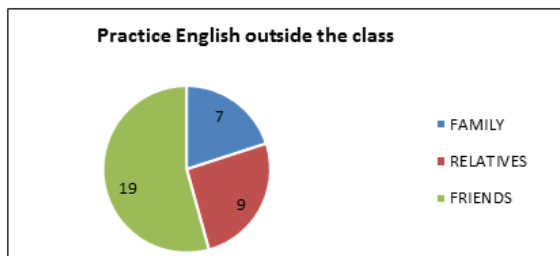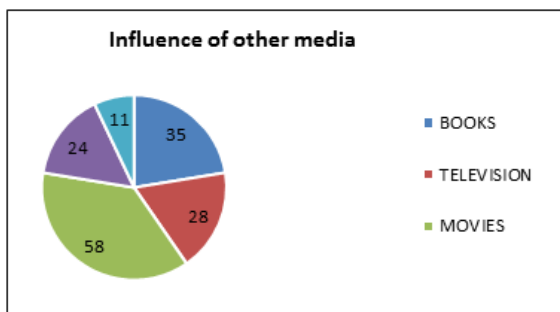
Illustration: 3

Illustration: 4

When we consider external factors like watching TV, Movies; listening to English music; reading English newspapers and magazines; they also pose problems since exposure to such factors are minimal or nil especially when it comes to female learners. This lack of exposure to the input skills namely listening and reading largely curtails the development of the output skills namely writing and speaking. The questionnaire found out that 58 students watch English movies regularly, 38 of them read books, 28 of them watch English programmes on TV, 24 listen to English music and 11 read newspapers and magazines. Since more than 50% of

them watch movies we can use it as a medium to teach English. If lack of motivation from the classroom to pursue these media is one reason, lack of self-drive is also a major reason for students not indulging in practicing English using these available resources. So it becomes the duty of the teacher to first motivate the students to indulge themselves in such resources which are readily available. Introduce books, short stories as extensive reading material and create interest in them to cultivate reading habits. Using movies and music in the class to teach the various skills would be an effective tool. But the teacher must be able to adopt the resources to cater to his/her student's needs.

When questioned about their weak spot in learning English, 48 out of 101 felt that it was grammar, 40 said that it was spelling, 33 said it was vocabulary and 22 said it was pronunciation. Even the students who are the most fluent find it difficult to spell English words properly.

Illustration: 5
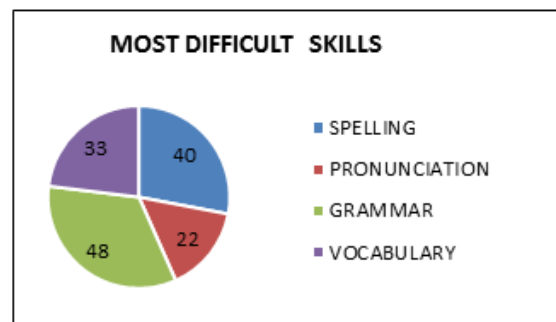
There are various reasons for this phenomena. Arab students have difficulty in differentiating between 'P' and 'B' since there is no 'P' sound in Arabic. They tend to replace 'P' with 'B' like Blay, Bray for Play and Pray. Same is the case with 'G' and 'J'; this is a pronunciation problem. Most often they tend to interchange these two sounds for example they say gam for jam and jame for game etc. While writing they find it difficult to differentiate between d and b since these two are mirror images of each other, they often replace one with the other like 'bay' for 'day' and 'doy' for 'boy'.

Before we even discuss these short comings we should as teachers first understand the major issues before the learner who wants to learn English. First Arabic is written from right to left,

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whereas English is written from left to right, the form itself confuses the beginner. Both languages belong to different semantic groups therefore have major differences in grammar. A learner whose mother tongue is French can learn English easily because both languages belong to the same family of languages, they share alphabet and the grammar rules. But a language like Arabic which is totally different from English would influence the language acquisition of the learner.

Illustration: 6

Remedial Measures: In spite of all the shortcomings almost all the students have said that English is very important for their career growth. When asked to list the various reasons why the language is important to them, they said for getting a better job and to communicate they need English. Some students also felt that it gives them an opportunity to go abroad and work. This attitude is the greatest resource for any teacher to motivate the students, create a little interest in the teaching-learning methodology and they would be back on track. So we decided to introduce simple games in our class and get them involved in the learning process. We used three popular and interesting games to teach spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary, they are **Hear-Say Cards, Hangman** and **Name–Place–Animal–Thing** respectively.

Constant drilling of the pronunciation of these consonant sounds helps them in differentiating the same. But drilling could be boring and demotivating. It is the duty of the teacher to motivate and create interest in the language, therefore this drilling could be done by way of games. Games not only create interest but also keeps the students involved in learning.

To tackle the pronunciation and spelling problem especially with sounds like /b/, /p/, /g/ and /j/ we decided to use The Hear-Say card game suggested by Pennington, M.C., & Richards, J. in their book Pronunciation Revisited.

HEAR - SAY WORD GAME

We selected 20 words beginning with B and P for the first set and 20 words beginning with 'G' and 'J' for the second set. We made sure that these are simple words and consciously avoided consonant clusters since that would be too difficult for the students to pronounce. First we wrote the words on the board and made them familiar to the students, also taught the pronunciation of the same. Then we divided the class into groups of four and each group was given a set of cards.

Rules of the game

Step 1: Introduce the game.

Step 2: Familiarize students with new vocabulary. This can be done by writing words on the board and making them repeat it. If time permits, explain the pronunciation of /b/ and /p/ by using the vocabulary.

Step 3: Make a group of four and give each student a card (i.e. A, B, C, and D). Students should not look at the cards until you are ready to start.

Step 4: Explain to the students that there are two columns, a 'Hear' column and a 'Say' column. When they hear the word in the 'Hear' column they should say the word parallel to it in the 'Say' column.

Example: (follow the illustration given below) When the teacher says "Start", Student A should respond by reading the underlined word 'Pat" in the 'Say' column. Now Student B, who has the word 'Pat' listed in 'Hear' column should read the word parallel to 'Pat' i.e. 'Beak' likewise student C and D will continue to lead the game. However, if Student C misunderstands the word 'Peak' as 'Beak' and responds by repeating 'Peak' then the game comes to an abrupt stop and the group needs to start all over again from 'Pat'.

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Words emphasizing   /b/ and /p/   Illustration: 7

Card 1

Hear	Say
Bat	**Pat**
Peak	Back
Pick	Bear
Bed	Pad
Best	Past

Card 2

Hear	Say
Pin	Bat
Beam	Pick
Pear	Bed
Pelt	Best
Ball	Pill

Card 3

Hear	Say
Bin	Pin
Beak	Peak
Pack	Beam
Belt	Pelt
Past	Ball

Card 4

Hear	Say
Pill	Bin
Pat	Beak
Back	Pack
Bear	Pear
Pad	Belt

Words emphasizing /g/ and /j/

Card 1

Hear	Say
Game	Gun
God	**Juice**
Girl	Jolt
Go	Just
Goat	Gold

Card 2

Hear	Say
Gun	Jug
Juice	Goose
Green	Jeep
Just	Jewel
Join	Game

Card 3

Hear	Say
Jam	God
Grass	Jail
Jeep	Girl
Jewel	Goat
Judge	Join

Card 4

Hear	Say
Jug	Jam
Goose	Grass
Jail	Green
Jolt	Go
Gold	Judge

The student holding the card with the underlined word under 'Say' column begins the game, each student should say the word listed in SAY when he/she hears the word listed in the opposite row. The game is over only when all the words are said and the circle completed, for which each word should be pronounced correctly and heard clearly. It is a fun game which encourages the students to improve their pronunciation. This game can be improvised based on the level of the students. It is the teacher's discretion to choose words which would add to their student's vocabulary needs.

HANGMAN

Spelling can be best taught using the classic spelling game HANGMAN.

It is a simple game which needs no elaborate materials, just a piece of paper and pen would do.

Rules of the game:

Step 1: Introduce the game to the students

Step 2: Choose and train students on a specific vocabulary

Step 3: Divide students into groups of two or three.

Step 4: Draw blanks for the number of words on the board (if it is a difficult word give clues like Name the fruit, Name the furniture, Name the place etc.)

Step 5: Ask each team to guess one letter at a time. Many students prefer to start with vowels, which easily fits in the blanks, which automatically leads the students to guess the correct word by identifying the remaining letters. Nevertheless, for every wrong letter the teacher draws a part of a Stickman. Once the figure is complete it is hanged signifying the end of game. So the aim of this exercise is to find the word before the Stickman is hanged.

Illustration: 8

Clue: Name the game.
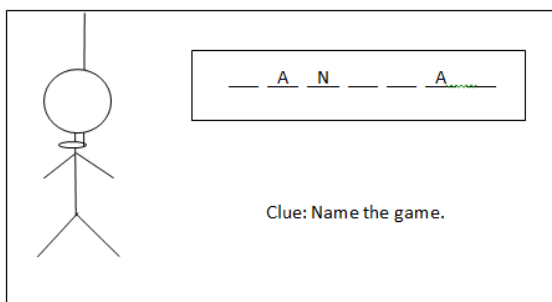
Variation to the game: if the teacher feels that hanging someone is too crude a way to teach spelling he/she can always draw a snowman or an invisible man by erasing each part of the already drawn stick figure for each wrong spelling.

It is a fun game and the retention level of spelling is far greater than when the students are asked to memorise the spelling.

NAME–PLACE–ANIMAL–THING

Games can be used to teach vocabulary too. It avoids monotony in class and students are involved greatly in game activities. They are also motivated when they have to compete with their peers. The simple but effective game that we used to teach vocabulary is Name–Place–Animal–Thing. This game can be used to teach nouns or can be adopted to teach any part of speech as required by the teacher.

Rules of the game

Step 1: Introduce the game to the students

Step 2: Choose a specific set of vocabulary and train the students

Step 3: Divide the class into groups of two or three

Step 4: Ask the students to make five columns each for Name (of a person), Place, Animal, Things and Score. The teacher picks a random alphabet and starts the timer, the students should write words beginning with the said letter in all the four columns. At the end of the given time the teacher checks the answers, each correct word is awarded 10 points and each word which is repeated by two or more teams gets five points. The game can be played until all letters in the alphabet are exhausted. The team with the maximum score wins the game.

Illustration: 9

NAME	PLACE	ANIMAL	THING	SCORE
ALI	AL AIN	ANT	APPLE	40
SALEM	SUR	SNAKE	SOFA	40
IBTISAM	IBRI	IGUANA	INKBOTTLE	40
PETER	PARIS	PIGEON	PIN	40
NASEER	NIZWA	NIGHTINGALE	NOTEBOOK	40

Outcome: Though these games are very simple in nature and some might find it too familiar and too mundane, we would like to assure that they have been very effective in teaching these skills and also have motivated our students to learn English from a different perspective and to approach the language in a new light. Learning English is no more a boring, tedious activity but a fun-filled, playful experience.

Conclusion

To sum up, this paper is a humble attempt to find out the basic challenges that the teachers of English face when they teach Arab students. We have dealt with prominent spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary issues using simple but effective games in class and the results have been good. The students participated with great enthusiasm and were satisfied with their performance and results too. We believe that if these methods are used in class the teachers can easily pass the early hurdles in handling Arab students. There are many more hurdles that one would face in handling these classes, which opens avenues for further research and study. We are indeed planning to explore these

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possibilities and share our findings in our future papers.

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Appendix: 1

P: Padmini   N: Nagaraj

DATA COMPILATION

Number of years of learning English	Between 8 to 10 years			Between 10 to 15 years		
	P	N	Total	P	N	Total
	0	8	**8**	34	59	**93**

QUESTION NUMBER	YES			NO		
	P	N	Total	P	N	Total
2	27	63	**90**	7	4	**11**
3	26	44	**70**	8	23	**31**
4	31	54	**85**	3	13	**16**
5	9	24	**33**	25	43	**68**
9	34	66	**100**	0	01	**01**

QUESTION NO: 6

FAMILY			RELATIVES			FRIENDS		
P	N	Total	P	N	Total	P	N	Total
1	6	**7**	3	6	**9**	5	14	**19**

QUESTION NO: 7

BOOKS			TV			MOVIES			MUSIC			NEWSPAPER & MAGAZINE		
P	N	Total	P	N	Total	P	N	Total	P	N	Total	P	N	Total
6	29	**35**	2	26	**28**	16	42	**58**	10	14	**24**	1	10	**11**

QUESTION NO: 8

SPELLING			PRONUNCIATION			GRAMMAR			VOCABULARY		
P	N	Total	P	N	Total	P	N	Total	P	N	Total
13	27	**40**	5	17	**22**	16	32	**48**	7	26	**33**

QUESTION NO 10

FOR JOB			TO GO ABROAD			IMPORTANT LANGUAGE			TO COMMUNICATE		
P	N	Total	P	N	Total	P	N	Total	P	N	Total
17	23	**40**	7	6	**13**	7	15	**22**	6	22	**28**

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