

## TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH FOR ARAB SPEAKERS

Mira M. Alameddine  
Rafic Hariri University  
alameddine.mira@gmail.com  
alameddinemm@rhu.edu.lb

### Abstract

Teaching Business English (L2) for target learners whose L1 is Arabic requires certain procedures. Instructors must address problems that their Arabic learners will probably face in acquiring Business communication in L2. This paper will discuss the major problems that learners whose L1 is Arabic face in learning Business English which is L2 and what the role of the instructor is in guiding the learners to overcome these obstacles and acquire the desired skills. Instructors need to address the four problems that their Arab learners are probably going to encounter. These problems are: 1) negative transfer; 2) the difference in writing strategies; 3) prepositional knowledge; and 4) collocational patterns. Thus, instructors have to teach the learners to overcome negative transfer, include practices that guide the learners to overcome the differences in strategies of business communication that exist between L1 and L2 and address the cultural differences between the two main languages.

**Keywords:** *Teaching, Business, English*

### 1.Introduction

The Arabs value the English language. An increasing population of their students goes to English schools because the language is in high demand in the work place. In this manner, what sets the students or future employees from the rest of the candidates is her/his ability to communicate properly in English, particularly using English in the business world. Arab students learn business English to fulfill work-related needs. They enroll in such courses in the hope that the skills given in such courses will be an asset for them to be employed by a multinational corporation. These corporations located in the Arab world usually seek employees who can communicate with foreign managers, write and reply to e-mails, letters, read formal and informal reports and perform other tasks that are typical in the workplace [4]. However, as EFL learners, Arab business English students face some difficulties. They face problems in speaking and writing. They not only have to learn the standard techniques of business communication (such as e-mails, letters, memos & formal and informal reports), they also have to learn them in English! They need to acquire the language to communicate with it.

Arabic and English language differ in many ways. Arab speakers face several problems while learning English, such as phonological and morphological difficulties and structural as well [16]. When teaching English for Arab students, teachers have to keep in mind that the Arabic writing system goes from right to left and that the letters are written with-respect-to their position in the word. Moreover, orthographies of the two languages are different and at times present some difficulties in pronunciation and spelling [16].

What does this mean to the business English instructor? Learning English as a second language for Arabs has a lot of implications for instructors. Instructors of business English have to consider the principles of second language acquisition (SLA) and the four major problems that their students might face in acquiring ESP- especially business English.

### 2.SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

According to Stephen Krashen (1982) "Acquisition requires meaningful interactions in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding." Moreover, they need teaching methods that give the learners 'comprehensible input' in situations that don't posit anxiety and contain messages that students want to hear. These methods should not force the learners to produce L2 in the beginning of the acquisition of the language. They leave room for them to produce L2 when they are ready to do so. This method supplies communicative and comprehensible input [17]. This requires the teachers, or 'practitioners' [5], to design the course and materials accordingly. Their course should include activities that allow the learners acquire the desired skills through meaningful interactions while providing them with enough time to assimilate the information and then produce then with comfort.

As practitioners, Business English teachers need to address in their teaching, the following four problems their Arab learners are likely to encounter. These are: 1) Negative Transfer; 2) Different Writing Strategies; 3) Prepositional Knowledge; and 4) Collocational Pattern.

### 3.NEGATIVE TRANSFER

Samuel Johnson stated in 1761 that “To use two languages familiarly and without contaminating one by the other, is very difficult.” This statement still hold true in our present time. What Johnson expressed then is now known as transfer. In its regular meaning, transfer is “to cause something to pass from one place to another” (Merriam-Webster, 2012). There are two types of transfer: negative and positive. The former is the use of prior knowledge in the production of L2 which results into unacceptable forms, for it damages, hinders and delays the acquisition of L2. The latter is when L1 is used to gain L2 and it results in successful acquisition of L2. It is the former that Business English teachers should look into to give considerations while teaching their students. For example, L1 hindering the acquisition of L2 could result into distorted word order. In Arabic (L1), the structure is: *verb+subject+object*, while in English (L2), it is *subject+verb+object*. So the sentence become *Ate Maya the apple* instead of *Maya ate the apple*. Moreover, negative transfer can lead to awkward translation of expressions. For instance, an Arab student might say “*I cut the street.*” Although the sentence is grammatically correct, it is semantically incorrect. The correct form is “*I crossed the street.*”

Negative transfer is when particular elements in L1 become obstacles in acquiring L2. [10] stated that it is when L1 negatively affects the performance of L2, the target language to be learned. Negative transfer has been studied several times over the years (Diab, 1996; [8] [13] Farouq, 1998) and the results have revealed almost the same findings: that L1 posits negative effects on learning L2. The negative effects can be reflected in the interlingual-transfer and interference. The *former* is when the students’ L1 habits hinder their acquisition of the patterns and rules of L2. The *latter* is the negative effect of L1 on the acquisition of L2 such as translating form Arabic. Hence, Arab learners aiming at acquiring L2-English- might come up with wrong expressions such as:

- Dead Sea vs. Sea Dead
- We go to work vs. Go we to work
- By accomplishing these plans I will insure myself a great business plan.
- Putting strategies for business management works my brain.
- Most employees, when they work extra hours ...
- They (money) smell great.
- Many others ways.
- I am disabled; I can’t work anymore!

Teachers/Practitioners of business English need to keep this in mind when conducting their classes. They should train the learners to adjust their linguistic practices when learning L2.

### 4.THE DIFFERENCES IN WRITING STRATEGIES

Culture is “the way we do things here” or “the way in which a group of people solves problem” [5]. Cultures differ in their expectations regarding rhetorical patterns or logical organization of any text [1]. Language usually reflects culture and culture does affect language. Thus, written discourse of Arab learners depends on Arabic logic and cultural patterns. This renders Arabic writing filled with embellished literary style as opposed to the English rhetoric that is made in a cold and highly impersonal style [16]. Moreover, Arab writing bases its style on the Quran and refers to religious concepts as supporting points [19].

Further differences occur. To begin with, in Arabic, the writing system begins from right and not left. Syntactic differences between the two languages also exist. Moreover, Arabs face three main types of errors in their verb phrase; these are verb formation, tenses and subject-verb agreement. Learners make mistakes in the tense sequences and confuse the perfect tenses [14]. They also exhibit an overuse of coordinating sentences because their ideas in Arabic are connected with ‘and’. In his research, Diab (1996) comments on how in Arabic items in a series are preceded by the conjunction ‘wa’ that is equivalent to ‘and’ so learners end up with sentences such as “*For the employees to follow my demands and realize how important it is to follow them and how hard I work to achieve our purpose.*”

These problems posit problems for the learners because they cause language that contradicts with the language of business, which is characterized by “sense of purpose” [6]. The purpose of business is to reach an end. Hence, language’s purpose is to send a message and its success depends on how well the message is received and understood. For this success to take place, language has to be clear, logical and direct to the point. Messages such as the examples give below posit an serious obstacle in business communication.

- I have been doing that since a long time ago.
- These workers are smarts.
- What I want to be?

- You have a brother?
- I have planned for the project for a long time.

### 5. PREPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Prepositions used in Arabic and English language have different purposes. There are some in English that have their equivalents in Arabic; however, there are also a few that do not have. Pittman (as cited by [11]) recognized that English prepositions are difficult to learn and teach. Takahashi in 1969 (as cited by [11]) agrees with Pittman that using preposition properly is one of the major problems for learners of English.

Arab students learning L2 (English) usually depend on their L1 prepositional knowledge to understand the use of prepositions in L2. This posits difficulties for them because L2 prepositions are difficult to learn. In their study, Lakkis and Abdul Malak (2000) revealed that Arab learners did not use prepositions with verbs such as *like*, *compete*, *wait*, *result*, *collide*, and *engage* because these verbs in their Arabic equivalence do not use prepositions. While when using English verbs whose Arabic equivalence use prepositions, most learners used the verb with the preposition correctly.

Many of the English prepositions do not have literal equivalents in L1. There many prepositions in English that have the same function since “prepositions seldom have a one to one correspondence between English and Arabic. An Arabic preposition may be translated by several English prepositions while and English usage may have several Arabic translations” [18]; this posits difficulties for the students because then they are unable to choose which preposition to use.

- In my father’s footsteps.
- In my way to school.
- Getting an early start about the project can help by determining about the time to execute it.
- I have trouble at work because ▼ the lack of skills in management.
- Come to here

### 6. COLLOCATIONAL PATTERNS

Research indicates that differences in the structures of L1 and L2 and differences and/or similarities of collocations of the two languages can result in interference for L1 learners while learning their target language L2 [15]. Collocation means “sequence of lexical items which habitually co-occur, but are nonetheless fully transparent in the sense that each lexical constituent is also a semantic constituent” (Curse, 1987, p 40). It is the “group of words which occur repeatedly in a language” [2]. According to *Oxford Collocations Dictionary* (2011) “the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing.”

Recently, the role of collocation has become important in learning L2 since learners learn and use words in context. Without knowing the correct co-text with which a word is used, learners of L2 can not be said to have mastered the word of L2 (Phythian-Sence & Wagner, 2007 as cited by [15]). Collocation problems exist when a difference between source- and target-language word partners exist and usually it is the result of negative transfer. Hence, collocational patterns produce problems for Arab students while acquiring L2. So learners might end up making mistakes such as those described below.

- Do mistakes instead of Make mistakes
- Give somebody a smile instead of Smiles at somebody
- Become/Get bankrupt instead of Go bankrupt
- Grow flowers instead of Plant flowers
- Raise an objection instead of Present an objection
- High sounds instead of Loud sounds

### 7. IMPLICATIONS

Arabic students learning English face problems in their communication: they translate from Arabic, and have difficulty in pronunciation and almost all of them face difficulty in communicating freely in English. Instructors of Business English, whose native language could be Arabic or not, need to take into consideration the four problems mentioned above.

Instructors of Business English should:

1. Help their students use English by involving them in real-life situations. They should use authentic material because these include real-life situations and terminologies that might be missing in text books; thus the content of the material becomes useful for the teacher and the learner [6].
2. Provide their students with hands on activities that will help the students be more accurate.

3. Supply the students with exercises that help them focus on verb “be” and article usage.
4. Use sentence combining exercises that stress subject-verb agreement, subject and object relative pronoun deletion rules and plural formation.
5. Provide them with rules (when possible) that help the students choose the correct preposition [11].
6. Pay attention to teaching the proper expressions [15] by providing them with sufficient practice opportunities through hands-on business activities.
7. Make sure that they provide the learners with new supporting arguments for their formal reports so as not to keep repeating the main ideas.
8. Give enough practice on how to write a paragraph so as not to write multiple supporting points within a paragraph.
9. Work at supplying their Business English learners with exercises that help them write correct form of sentence based on analysis of ideas so. In this way they would avoid synthesizing ideas by using coordination and instead use subordination depending on the relationship analysis.

The role of the Business English teacher is two-fold: s/he has to teach her/his Arab learners the English language and how to communicate in business using that language. To do so, the teacher has to make sure that the steps applied in second language acquisition are followed and that the major obstacles faced by Arab learners, namely, negative transfer, the difference in writing strategies, prepositional knowledge, and collocational patterns are properly addressed.

## References

- [1] Bruce, S.; Rafoth, B. (eds). *ESL Writers*. USA: Boyton/Cook Publishers. 2004.
- [2] Carter, R. *Vocabulary: Applied linguistic perspectives*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge. 1998.
- [3] Cruse, D.A. *Lexical semantics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 1986.
- [4] Donna, S. *Teach business English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 200.
- [5] Dudley-Evans, T.; St John, M.J. *Development in English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1998.
- [6] Ellis, M.; Johnson, C. *Teaching Business English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1994.
- [7] Johnson, S. *Useful Quotes on Second Language Acquisition*. Retrieved on November 1, 2011 from <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/SLA/SLAQuotes.htm>
- [8] Habash, Z. *Common Errors in the Use of English Prepositions in the Written Work of UNRWA Students at the End of the Preparatory Cycle in the Jerusalem Area*. Unpublished thesis. Retrieved on 4/11/2011 from [www.zeinab-habash.ws/education/books/master.pdf](http://www.zeinab-habash.ws/education/books/master.pdf)
- [9] Krashen, S. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Press. 1982.
- [10] Lado, R. *Language across Cultures*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1964.
- [11] Lakkis, K. & Abdel Malak, M. Understanding the Transfer of Prepositions: Arabic to English. *Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs: Office of English Language Programs*. Retrieved on 4/11/2011 from <http://eca.state.gov/forum/vols/vol38/no3/p26.htm>
- [12] Lea, D. (Ed.). *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for students of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2002.
- [13] Okuma, S. Indices of L1 transfer in EFL writing. *Written Communication*. Retrieved on 4/11/2011 from [http://openlibrary.org/works/OL12411142W/Indices\\_of\\_L1\\_transfer\\_in\\_EFL\\_writing\\_a\\_study\\_of\\_Japanese\\_learners\\_of\\_English](http://openlibrary.org/works/OL12411142W/Indices_of_L1_transfer_in_EFL_writing_a_study_of_Japanese_learners_of_English)
- [14] Rabab'ah, G. Communication Problems Facing Arab Learners of English. *Journal of Language and Learning*, 3(1), pp 180-197. 2007.
- [15] Sadeghi, K. Collocational Differences Between L1 and L2: Implications for EFL Learners and Teachers. *TESL Canada Journal*, 26(2), 2009. pp 100-124.
- [16] Sanks, S.L.; Suleiman, M.F. Teaching English to Arabic-Speaking Students: Cultural and Linguistic Considerations. Proceedings of the National Association for Bilingual Education Conference, Washington, D.C. supplied by EDRS. 1993
- [17] Schutz, R. Stephen Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition. *English Made in Brazil*. Retrieved 3/14/2011 from <http://www.sk.com.br/sk.krash.html>
- [18] Scott, M. & Tucker, R. Error analysis and English Language Strategies of Arab Students. *Language Learning*, 24, pp 69-97. 1974
- [19] Thompson-Panos, K. & Thomas-Ruzic, M. The least you should know about Arabic: Implications for the ESL writing instructor. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17(4), pp 609-623. 1983.