

Helping Learners with Common English Difficulties

عربي

Arabic

Introduction & Background

This guide is designed to support ESOL tutors, volunteers, and staff working with **Arabic**-speaking learners. It outlines the most common challenges these learners face when learning English and offers practical examples, explanations, and exercises to support more effective communication. The aim is to build understanding, patience, and confidence in supporting **Arabic** speakers on their learning journey.

Arabic

Arabic is the main language for **422 million** people, making it one of the most spoken languages globally.

It is the official language in **22 countries**, like Morocco, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. It's also one of the six official languages of the United Nations.

Arabic and English differ a lot in **sound system, grammar, vocabulary, and writing system**, so Arabic speakers tend to face certain predictable difficulties when learning English.

Pronunciation & Phonology

1. Sounds missing in Arabic

- /p/ → replaced with /b/ (“*park*” → “*bark*”).
- /v/ → replaced with /f/ (“*very*” → “*fery*”).
- /ŋ/ (as in “*sing*”) → replaced with /n/ (“*sing*” → “*sin*”).
- /ɹ/ (English “*r*”) → pronounced as a rolled or trilled [r].

2. Consonant clusters

- Arabic usually inserts short vowels between clusters.
- “*school*” → “*iskool*”, “*street*” → “*istreet*.”

3. Final consonants

- Arabic words often end in vowels, so learners may add a vowel after final consonants (“*cat*” → “*cata*”).

4. Vowel system

- Arabic has fewer vowels than English. Learners may confuse /ɪ/ and /iː/ (“*ship*” vs. “*sheep*”) or /ʌ/ and /ɑː/ (“*luck*” vs. “*lock*”).



Grammar & Syntax

1. Articles (a, an, the)

- Arabic has the definite article (al-) but no true equivalent of a/an. Learners often omit or misuse them.
- Incorrect: “*I bought book.*” → Correct: “*I bought a book.*”

2. Verb tenses

- Arabic verbs work differently (focus on aspect rather than tense). Learners often:
 - Overuse present simple (“*I go yesterday*” instead of “*I went*”).
 - Struggle with perfect tenses (“*I have eaten*”).



Grammar & Syntax

1. Word order

- Standard Arabic is often VSO (“*Ate Ali the apple*”), while English is SVO.
- Learners may produce unnatural word orders.

2. Negation

- Arabic uses different negative structures, so learners may simplify:
 - “*He not go*” instead of “*He doesn't go.*”

3. Plural forms

- Arabic plurals are irregular (“broken plurals”), so English irregular plurals (man → men, child → children) are especially confusing.

Vocabulary & Expression

1. False friends / direct translation

- Learners may say “*I’m feeling boring*” (literal from Arabic) instead of “*I’m bored.*”

2. Prepositions

- Usage differs a lot:
 - “*I’m waiting you*” (from Arabic structure) → should be “*I’m waiting for you.*”

3. Over-formality

- Because Arabic has clear formal/informal registers, learners may sound too formal in casual English.

Writing System

1. Alphabet difference

- Arabic script is completely different from Latin. Switching to English spelling is tough, especially with irregular English spelling.

2. Right-to-left writing

- Learners sometimes accidentally reverse letters or struggle with left-to-right orientation at the beginner stage.

Sociolinguistic Factors

- Arabic has many **dialects** (Egyptian, Levantine, Gulf, Maghrebi, etc.), which differ from **Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)**. Learners' difficulties may vary depending on their dialect.
- English exposure varies widely: some Arabic speakers hear English daily (e.g., in the Gulf), while others may only encounter it in school.

Summary:

Arabic speakers usually struggle most with **pronunciation (/p/, /v/, consonant clusters, vowels), articles, tenses, prepositions, and word order**. Writing in the Latin alphabet is also an adjustment.

Common mistakes Arabic speakers make in English

Pronunciation Mistakes

1. /p/ → /b/

- “pen” → “ben”, “park” → “bark.”

2. /v/ → /f/

- “very good” → “fery good.”

3. Consonant clusters

- “school” → “iskool”, “street” → “istreet.”

4. Vowel confusion

- “ship” vs. “sheep”, “full” vs. “fool”, “luck” vs. “lock.”

5. Adding vowels after final consonants

- “cat” → “cata.”



Grammar Mistakes

1. Articles

- Incorrect: *"I bought book."*
- Correct: *"I bought a book."*

2. Verb tense errors

- Incorrect: *"Yesterday I go to the market."*
- Correct: *"Yesterday I went to the market."*
- Incorrect: *"I am here since two hours."*
- Correct: *"I have been here for two hours."*

3. Word order influenced by Arabic

- Incorrect: *"Ate Ali the apple."*
- Correct: *"Ali ate the apple."*

4. Negation

- Incorrect: *"He not go."*
- Correct: *"He doesn't go."*

5. Plural confusion

- Incorrect: *"Childs are playing."*
- Correct: *"Children are playing."*

Vocabulary / Expression Mistakes

1. Direct translation (false friends)

- Incorrect: *"I'm feeling boring."*
- Correct: *"I'm bored."*
- Incorrect: *"Close the TV."* (from Arabic "close" = "turn off").
- Correct: *"Turn off the TV."*

2. Preposition errors

- Incorrect: *"I'm waiting you."*
- Correct: *"I'm waiting for you."*
- Incorrect: *"We discussed about it."*
- Correct: *"We discussed it."*

3. Over-formality

- *"I request you to assist me in this matter."*
in casual conversation instead of *"Can you help me?"*



Writing Mistakes

- 1. Spelling influenced by Arabic phonetics**
 - “*bary*” for “*very*.”
 - “*skool*” for “*school*.”
- 2. Direction issues (beginner level)**
 - Some new learners reverse letters or mix right-to-left and left-to-right alignment.
- 3. Omission of vowels**
 - “*wrld*” instead of “*world*.”

Examples in Conversation

- **Arabic speaker:** “*He come yesterday.*”
(missing past tense → should be “*He came yesterday.*”)
- **Arabic speaker:** “*I am boring.*”
(wrong adjective → should be “*I am bored.*”)
- **Arabic speaker:** “*Please open the light.*”
(direct translation from Arabic → should be “*Turn on the light.*”)

Summary:

The most common mistakes Arabic speakers make are in **pronunciation (/p/, /v/, clusters, vowels), grammar (articles, tense, negation, word order), and vocabulary (direct translation, prepositions, over-formality).**

🎓 Teaching Strategies for Arabic Speakers Learning English

🔊 Pronunciation Strategies

Challenges: /p/, /v/, vowel distinctions, clusters, final consonants.

1. Minimal Pairs Drills

- p/b: pat – bat, park – bark
- v/f: vest – fest, vine – fine
- ship/sheep, luck/lock, full/fool.

2. Visual + Physical Cues

- Teach /p/ with a “paper test” (hold paper in front of lips – it moves with /p/, not /b/).
- Teach /v/ with hand on throat (vibration vs. no vibration for /f/).

3. Cluster Simplification Practice

- Start with added vowels (iskool), then gradually remove them:
 - iskool → skool → school.

4. Recording + Playback

- Learners record themselves reading sentences, then compare with native models.



Grammar Strategies

Challenges: Articles, tenses, negation, word order, plurals.

1. Articles (a/an/the)

- Use visuals: a cat (any cat) vs. the cat (specific).
- Cloze exercises: *I saw ___ apple, ___ sun, ___ cat.*

2. Tenses

- Use timelines (Yesterday → past simple, Now → present, Tomorrow → future).
- Practice “story retelling” in past tense with correction.

3. Negation

- Contrast with Arabic: show “he not go” vs. “he doesn’t go.”
- Practice “Yes/No → Negative” drills:
 - Teacher: “*He likes football.*” → Student: “*He doesn’t like football.*”

4. Word Order (VSO vs. SVO)

- Use sentence-rearranging activities:
 - *Ate the apple Ali* → *Ali ate the apple.*

5. Plurals

- Drill irregular plurals with visuals: one child – two children, one man – two men.
- Games: “Memory match” with singular/plural pairs.

Vocabulary & Expression Strategies

Challenges: Direct translation, prepositions, over-formality.

1. Prepositions in Context

- Teach chunks, not rules:
 - wait for someone, depend on something, good at math.
- Use physical role-play: put book on the table, sit in the chair.

2. False Friends Awareness

- Highlight common mistakes: “*open the light*” → “*turn on the light.*”
- Make “error-correction cards” where students correct wrong sentences.

3. Register Practice

- Compare formal vs. informal:
 - Formal: “*I request your assistance.*”
 - Informal: “*Can you help me?*”
- Role-play situations: job interview (formal) vs. chatting with a friend (informal).

Writing Strategies

Challenges: Alphabet switch, spelling, right-to-left interference.

1. Alphabet Drills

- Practice tricky letters (p/b, v/f) in spelling games.
- Dictation exercises with minimal pairs.

2. Phonics + Sight Words

- Teach spelling patterns: silent e, double consonants, irregulars (said, done, could).

3. Guided Writing

- Start with sentence frames (*I went to ___ yesterday.*).
- Build to paragraphs with word banks.

Speaking & Listening Strategies

1. Dialogues & Role Play

- Everyday contexts: shopping, ordering food, asking directions.
- Correct errors gently in real-time.

2. Stress & Intonation Practice

- Clap or tap rhythm: “*I DIDN'T say he stole the money.*”
- Compare stress shifts with meaning changes.

3. Listening Exposure

- Encourage listening to English songs, news, movies with subtitles.
- Use shadowing (repeat right after the speaker).

Cultural & Confidence-Building

1. Acknowledge Dialect Influence

- Explain differences between learner's dialect (e.g., Egyptian, Levantine) and English.
- Use familiar words to anchor learning (e.g., many English words are loaned into Arabic).

2. Safe Environment

- Let learners speak freely without immediate correction.
- Use peer correction, group practice, and games.

3. Celebrate Multilingualism

- Remind learners they already juggle Arabic + dialect + sometimes French/English – this is an advantage!

Summary:

For Arabic speakers, focus on **pronunciation (/p/, /v/, vowels, clusters), articles & tense drills, prepositions & false friends, and writing practice** with lots of real-life, communicative activities.

Common Arabic phrases

Greetings & Basics

- **As-salāmu ‘alaykum** (السلام عليكم) → Peace be upon you / Hello
 - Reply: **Wa-‘alaykum as-salām** (وعليكم السلام) → And peace be upon you
- **Marḥaban** (مرحباً) → Hello / Welcome
- **Kayfa ḥāluka?** (كيف حالك؟) → How are you? (to a man)
- **Kayfa ḥāluki?** (كيف حالكِ؟) → How are you? (to a woman)
- **Al-ḥamdu lillāh** (الحمد لله) → Thanks be to God (common reply to “How are you?”)

Introductions

- **Mā ismuka?** (ما اسمك؟) → What is your name? (to a man)
- **Mā ismuki?** (ما اسمكِ؟) → What is your name? (to a woman)
- **Ismī ...** (... اسمي) → My name is ...
- **Tasharrafnā** (تشرفنا) → Nice to meet you



Politeness

- **Shukran** (شكراً) → Thank you
- **Shukran jazīlan** (شكراً جزيلاً) → Thank you very much
- **'Afwan** (عفواً) → You're welcome / Excuse me
- **Min faḍlik** (من فضلك) → Please (to a man)
- **Min faḍliki** (من فضلكِ) → Please (to a woman)
- **Āsif** (آسف) → Sorry (male speaker)
- **Āsifa** (آسفة) → Sorry (female speaker)



Food & Drink

- **Mā'** (ماء) → Water
- **Qahwa** (قهوة) → Coffee
- **Shāy** (شاي) → Tea
- **'Indī jaw'ān** (عندي جوعان) → I'm hungry
- **'Indī 'aṭshān** (عندي عطشان) → I'm thirsty



Getting Around

- **Ayna ...?** (أين ...؟) → Where is ...?
- **Kam al-thaman?** (كم الثمن؟) → How much does it cost?
- **Turīdū an tadhhab?** (تريد أن تذهب؟) → Do you want to go?
- **Al-yamīn** (اليمين) → Right
- **Al-yasār** (اليسار) → Left



Polite Closings

- **Ma'a as-salāma** (مع السلامة) → Goodbye (lit. "with peace")
- **Ilā al-liqā'** (إلى اللقاء) → See you later
- **Ṣabāḥ al-khayr** (صباح الخير) → Good morning
 - Reply: **Ṣabāḥ an-nūr** (صباح النور) → Morning of light
- **Masā' al-khayr** (مساء الخير) → Good evening
 - Reply: **Masā' an-nūr** (مساء النور) → Evening of light
- **Layla sa'īda** (ليلة سعيدة) → Good night



✓ Note on dialects:

- Egyptians often say **Izayyak?** (ازيك؟) “How are you?” instead of *Kayfa ḥāluka?*
- Levantine Arabic (Lebanese/Syrian/Jordanian/Palestinian) uses **Kīfak?** (كيفك؟) for “How are you?”
- Gulf Arabic often uses **Shlonak?** (شلونك؟).