



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

Information and Tips from The Multilingual and Multicultural Center

Donald L. Bouchard

Portland Public Schools
150 Ocean Ave., Portland, Maine 04103

Tel. (207) 874-8135
Fax (207) 756-8421 Vol. 10, No. 4

Sociocultural Issues in Language Minority Education

THE VARIED WORLD OF ELLS WITH ARABIC LANGUAGE BACKGROUND

The "Arab world" consists of 22 countries in north Africa and the Middle East whose populations *hear, speak, read, and write* a local dialect of modern standard Arabic. A larger world of Arabic language use includes several other countries in Africa and Asia united by the Koranic tradition and Islamic faith who *read and recite* classical written Arabic. The populations of these countries speak other native languages, but by practicing Islam *all these cultures* worship by reading and reciting the Koran. This *Bulletin* examines some unique features of Arabic and the implications of Arabic learning among English Language Learners (ELLs).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

Arabic has a number of distinctive characteristics:

-Arabic spoken across the Arab world varies from country to country, a difference far greater than the differences which exist between U.S. British, and Australian English.

-words are written horizontally from right to left.

-the sound, or phonological, system

of Arabic places meaning distinction only on long vowels. Short vowel sounds are designated by marks above and below words and do not convey meaningful differences. The marks are not written out except in classical Arabic. Long vowels are letters always written out and express differences in word meaning.

-the Arabic print system consists of 28 letters, only 3 of which are vowels. Words typically contain 3 consonants and denote words having connected meaning. Thus, the Arabic equivalent of *k-t-b*, expresses the notion of 'writing', and in print form would mean 'book', 'office', 'library', and 'author', depending upon sentence context.

-most letters change form depending on whether they appear at the beginning, middle, or end of a word.

-unlike English, Arabic sentences can be ordered differently without changing meaning. Thus, *The boy rings the bell* can be written as *Boy the bell rings*, and *Rings boy the bell*. More specifically, in Arabic print it would look like: *Th by rngs th bll. By th bll rngs, or Rngs by th bll.*

-Arabic grammar generally avoids subordination (e.g., uses of words like

although and *since*, etc. to introduce dependent clauses) and complexity in its construction.

There are other differences between Arabic and English too numerous to mention here. Of noteworthy relevance for teachers are how Arabic is learned and the respect accorded to the written, classical form of the language.

LEARNING AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE WRITTEN WORD

Formal knowledge and education is highly regarded in the Arab world and Islamic countries. Arabic and other content subjects are taught almost universally by rote memorization in a far more formal, teacher-dominated classroom context. One common strategy is recitation. It is the predominant strategy for memorizing Koranic verses and in classroom instruction.

The learning environment of U. S. classrooms are quite different. Strategies for fostering creativity and Socratic-style question posing in interactive learning contexts are what teachers commonly emphasize. This is in contrast to the recitation contexts of oral repetition common to Arabic language environments.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

There is a *linguistic* and a *cultural* dimension to an ELL's experience with Arabic that contrasts with learning in a U.S. classroom environment:

1. *Linguistic*. Readers tend to transfer first language reading processes (Arabic) to the second language (English). The consonantal nature of Arabic with its lack of emphasis on written vowels will cause readers to mispronounce English words unless and until they thoroughly develop sight word recognition and recognize the spelling patterns commonly found in words (e.g., 'ight' in *right*, *sight*, etc.). The

English vowel system is complicated, with dozens of distinct meaning differences found in various vowel combinations. Thus, English words such as *bitter*, *batter*, *butter*, and *better* will be inherently difficult to decode. Similarly, *hit*, *hot*, *hat*, *hut*, *hurt*, *heat* will be very challenging to read.

Writing in English often results in simplified sentence constructions with an overuse of coordination such as with the word *and*. In addition, English word placement may seem awkward and be nonsensical due to the flexibility of word placement in Arabic.

2. *Cultural*. ELLs from Islamic backgrounds with its Koranic tradition have a longstanding familiarity with the pedagogy of oral recitation and rote memorization and will be challenged by the U.S. classroom pedagogy of independent, individually-oriented pedagogy of critical thinking.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING

1. *Familiarity with English print through reading and writing practice is crucial, especially at all stages of literacy development and content learning*. The recitation quality of accessing print inherent in the Koranic tradition will be a continual source of contrast to the complex decoding and constructive meaning emphasis required for English print reading.

2. *Fostering critical thinking in a meaning-based, collaborative inquiry-based delivery of instruction is inherently difficult for all students; it is particularly challenging for students accustomed to ongoing teacher-focused recitation learning*.

SOURCES:

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