

# **“Towards English As An International Dialect Of Communication In The Arab World”**

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## **Introduction:**

In Charles Dickens's time, young students were “provided with all necessities and instructed in all languages living and dead”. (Nicholas Nickleby, Ch. 3). It is of great importance that the peoples of the Arab World have a reasonable knowledge of English since it has become an international language. The number of people who understand, let alone speak, Arabic is small and the Arab peoples are obliged to make use of English if they want to make contact with their friends abroad.

Today, English has been carried around the world and has grown in use until it has become the second most widely spoken language of the world after Chinese and the first language in international use. Interestingly, while English is predominantly used by more people than any other language on earth, its mother tongue speakers make up only a quarter or a fifth of the total.

The use of English falls into two major types: the “ethnocentred” and the “non-ethnocentred”. Native speakers live in nations and communities in which English has an established role and thus have an ethnocentred use of the language. Non-native speakers have a “non-ethnocentred” use since their nationalities and the linguistic histories of their countries are equally irrelevant. Their use of the language is determined by job, hobby, or field of study (Strevens, 1987:57-58). Indeed the accident of historical events has largely determined where English is used for ethnocentred purposes. But the borrowing and anglicising characteristic of English has made the process easier and has contributed to a vast increase in the non-ethnocentred uses.

Strevens argues that native speakers of English especially of British English, should come to terms with the variations that occur among non-native speakers use of the language and should develop the feeling that English is no longer their own language but a language for world communication (Strevens, 1987:56).

In the first part of this paper the writer argues the need for an international variety of English to be taught in schools and universities in the Arab World. The international variety is defined as English that is understood by multi-lingual audience. It is a kind of English that is comprehensible outside the Arab World. For instance, the local Egyptian English spoken by the majority of Egyptians at the national level is both undesirable and useless at the international level because of problems of intelligibility.

In the second part of the paper the writer discusses the problems posed in adopting such a variety. The writer argues that what determines the use of English in Arab schools and universities should be the job, the hobby, or the field of study of students. English should be looked upon as a means of communication and understanding each other in fields that require the uses of a language other than Arabic. The writer argues that the goal of teaching an international variety should not be acculturation so as to preserve the cultural identity of Arab speakers of English.

Selinker (see Selinker 1972) points out that a perfect pronunciation is almost impossible to achieve. This is due to the fact that for most students (as Selinker claims) an interlanguage pronunciation (foreign accent) tends to fossilize at some point and such a fossilized foreign accent is very resistant to change. However, we should not accept such interlanguages (if they really exist) as models in our search for an international variety of English to be instituted and taught in our schools.

It is legitimate to opt for an international variety of English in our schools, but some thought must be given to the characteristics of such a variety. We should have native speaker English as a model to follow and imitate. If we abandon the attempt to teach Arab students native speaker English and give them only a model with a heavy accent, such as Japanese English, the students can not possibly achieve anything but a heavy accent. Of course, it is one thing to accept the probability that most Arab students' pronunciation will fossilize at some point short of their native speaker model, but it is quite

another thing to accept a model with a heavy accent such as Japanese (or for that matter) Russian English, (Schon, 1987:25). There is great value in consistency. Imagine how confused the school or university students would be if they get American English the first year, British English the second and third year. Indeed, it is not recommended to shift the whole emphasis of the course too soon.

Tolerance towards the varieties of English in its spoken form and the idioms used in these varieties is acceptable on the part of teachers as specialists in teaching English because their ears should be tuned to different kinds of pronunciation whether it is British English, American English, or even Indian English. However, they should insist (on the part of their students) on a particular correct pronunciation of a native speaker model.

The question the teacher should always ask is “does my student sound like a native speaker of English?” Of course a perfect pronunciation of English is almost impossible to achieve with all students. Indeed, the students who have the ability to achieve a near-native accent (especially those who have lived in the native speaker country) should not be denied the opportunity.

However, striving for adequate intelligibility rather than native-like perfection should be taken into consideration. We use English as an international variety to communicate. Students who can not achieve near-native pronunciation should not be denied the opportunity to communicate in the language. Again, perfect pronunciation of all sounds is not necessary to communicate. It is quite common to communicate well at the international level with someone who has a noticeable accent. Of the two, pronunciation and communication, communication is the more important. Usually, our Arab students who do not acquire a native-like pronunciation, can acquire intelligibility and this is a reasonable goal.

Part of the difficulty of acquiring good pronunciation among Arab students is due to the failure of schools in the Arab World to emphasize the speaking and listening skills. In Arab schools, teachers of English are constrained by prescribed text books, prescribed methods, and the overpresent threat of examinations based on reading and writing skills alone rather than on oral ability.

Striving for good and correct pronunciation should be taken into consideration since students' accent counts for very much if it interferes with the communication of the intended message. Some thought must be given, then, to the choice of a pronunciation model. We cannot allow our students to speak English with whatever accent they wish to have because this might threaten and lead to less than adequate standards for our English as an international variety. Whatever pronunciation model we opt for, we have to strive to make our students achieve native pronunciation. And unless they achieve that native pronunciation they will have an accent that is determined in large measure by the phonological patterns of Arabic, even at the level of 'inter-language fossilization'. A pronunciation model is necessary and the language laboratory helps the students a great deal in making the students rely on a model of pronunciation (British or American).

Of course, we have to set a number of criteria for the choice of a pronunciation model. But before we discuss the criteria, the characteristics of a standard for English as an international language must be given some thought.

For English as an international language, an international standard does exist in vocabulary and grammar. No such standard exists for pronunciation. For instance, there is a new trend in Europe to use an international variety of English that is neither pure American nor British English, but a variety that is suitable for use for communication anywhere and intelligible and international enough to be accepted by everyone (El-Sayed, 1987:78). The so-called "Educated European English" is a new local form of English that has emerged and is used by business people, professional administrators from France, Germany, Holland, Italy, etc., to communicate together, and in which they recognize each other as European by performing in an English with common features, but each with his/her own accent. (Schon, 1987:24).

What is more important in this respect to be emphasized is that as long as teachers in the Arab World, and other parts of the world as well, continue to teach the lexico-grammar of educated English, the unity of the language will transcend its immense diversity. This one set of grammatical patterns and core vocabulary has two absolutely crucial characteristics. First, it is accepted everywhere throughout the English using world, not just in one single locality. And second, it has, in Strevens, words, no 'twinned accent': it is spoken with any and every accent in the world. (Strevens, 1987:62).

As for the set of criteria selected for the choice of a pronunciation model, Schon (Schon, 1987:22-27) suggests three criteria. One : Teachers may go along with the prevailing opinion in their area and teach the model that is most admired in that part of the world.

Since the British were in the Arab World for a number of years as a colonizing power, British English would be the type of English that is most suitable as a model. There is no inherent superiority of the British pronunciation model, our choice stems from the fact that the British English variety was the variety that was naturally imposed and taught in the Arab World schools for a long time. There was no other choice for the Arabs. It was out of necessity, then, that the Arabs used the British pronunciation model in their schools.

As other parts of the world that were former colonies in the British empire, the Arab countries maintained greater contact with Britain than with other English speaking countries, and as a result, the tradition of teaching British English continued in Arab schools.

The second criterion one might look at is the use the students will make of their English. An examination of any Arab country's x-year plan or a survey of university mission statements show a strong movement in the direction of development and modernization. The gates to development and modernization happen to be science and technology, which are seen as English-dependent. As a consequence of this dependency, the status of English vis-a-vis other languages has become a foregone conclusion: English is more useful (and in some ways more prestigious) than other languages including the native language. (Abuhamdia, 1984:211).

In Arab countries, the situation, however, is compounded by the sentimental and ideological attachments of Arabs to Arabic, resulting in the current call and campaign to have Arabic replace foreign languages in the teaching of content subjects such as medicine and engineering. (At Syrian universities, for instance, Medicine is currently taught in Arabic). Consequently, the Arabs find themselves caught in a dilemma, torn between loyalty to Arabic, out of Islamic, ideological, cultural and nationalistic values, on the one hand, and the linguistic concomitants of importing and adopting technology from English based sources, on the other.

Understandably, then, to the Arabs, English does have an essential instrumental value at both the individual and national levels. This utilitarian value appears particularly at the higher educational level, for which it has been imperative. (Abuhamdia, 1984:214). Thus, the field of study and sometimes the job determine the use of English by Arabs and its importance as an instrument for survival becomes apparent.

Since the Arabs are in need of technology, we assume it (as opposed to politics) provides the ground for a cultural neutrality (taking into consideration the negative attitudes of the Arabs to British English as the language of the colonizer) on which the acquisition and the use of English can be promoted rather easily. (El-Sayed, 1987:75).

“The fact is that English can be deculturized, can be learned and used for purely instrumental purposes and can be separated from the value systems and the literary culture of any society of native speakers”. (Stevens, 1987:60).

Although English is still remembered as the language of the colonizer and negative attitudes are associated with it, it is taught in Arab schools because of its utilitarian value. Because English is not the language of just one country (England originally, but now U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean) there is already some neutrality in international English which has evolved naturally, but this neutrality may involve the use of lexical items and of auxiliary verbs, but definitely not pronunciation and probably not grammar since all the Englishes, except the pidgins and Creoles, share essentially the same grammar with only surface level differences.

If Arab students view English neutrally as a subject of utilitarian value at present, they may not view western culture positively because it is difficult to separate western culture from western governmental policies in the area which can account for suspicion and sometimes hostility on the part of EFL students (Zughoul, 1980:203). Indeed, language is a very emotional matter and the attitudinal factor is of utmost importance since positive attitudes towards the target language and its speakers results in motivation for learning the language.

The third criterion one may follow to choose a pronunciation model is the attitude of the school or university administration. In the Arab countries except for former French colonies, the British English pronunciation model is almost

the sole pronunciation model taught in schools. Nevertheless, some schools teach the American English pronunciation model. In many Arab countries those who do not know English are trying to either learn the British variety or the American variety. American English is taught in institutions such as the American University of Cairo or the American University of Beirut or other American centres established to teach U.S. bound adult students. There are also some other American private colleges and high schools established to serve the needs of the American community in the Arab World and the Arabs themselves who are interested in giving their children American education.

If our students fail to achieve native pronunciation but they are understood when they communicate with others, we should not worry much about their inability to reach that goal. Even if our students, come very close to use an international variety such as the one used in Europe that is neither pure American nor British English, we should accept it as a legitimate one. Towards An International Dialect of English in the Arab World: Some Problems:

What we need to adopt, then, is an international kind of English with international standard in grammar and vocabulary, an English that is understood by multi-lingual audience and comprehensible outside the Arab World. For example, a German English, a Japanese English, or even a Russian English are not acceptable simply because those Englishes are not dialects spoken in normal everyday life, but incomplete attempts to learn American English or British English or some other variety. We are not in need of a locally intelligible English at the national level such as the English spoken by Iraqis, Egyptians, or Palestinians. This kind of English is useless at the international level. We need to adopt and teach a kind of English (British or American) which is completely comprehensible outside the Arab World.

Kachru (See Kachru, 1981) emphasises that there is a crucial distinction between national and international English. He speaks of the "cline" of intelligibility. For instance, a minority of educated Indians (like Kachru himself) who have occasion to communicate on the international level are at one end of the cline, with Butler English and Boxwallah English (pedlar English) at the other end. Let the Indian pedlar, Kachru argues, use his Boxwallah English in the Indian villages, but let us all try to approach some major national standard when we talk to foreigners. What Kachru aims at is a national standard of Indian English as a necessary tool to communicate with foreigners outside India. For instance, the subdivisions of English and the greater variety do not

impede comprehension among Indians themselves, but a particular variety of Indian English spoken with an uneducated accent outside India might not be intelligible because it is spoken by an uneducated Indian.

The development towards a variety of English that is called 'English as a communication dialect' (Beneka, 1981:65) is well under way in Europe. In the Arab World we are constantly in need of English as a means of communication at the international level. Among users of English in international contexts there is a widespread readiness to tolerate a non-authentic (neither British nor American) 'international variety' which is clearly seen not as an 'interlanguage', a waystage on the road to perfection, but as a tool for communication in its own right, a final state.

It is necessary for a speaker of English as an international dialect to acquire a fully native control of the phonological system. The standardness of an international variety should relate to grammar first, then vocabulary and finally pronunciation. This does not mean that English as a communication dialect does not reflect the native language phonological systems of its speakers. What we are against here is basing standardness on pronunciation. Some non-native accents should be considered in the positive light. Distinctive foreign accents are associated with some non-native groups.

What Arab speakers of English need is to view English, too, in a positive manner. If they fail to acquire a fully native control of the phonological system of English, they should not feel frustrated and tolerate the linguistic disorientation which occur in the early stages of learning a new language. An attitude of outgoingness toward English is required since success in learning a language depends very much on that attitude.

Foreign language users interviewed within international companies said great demands were made on their ability and willingness to adopt British or American cultural norms when it came to questions of using (and even) understanding conversational routines and specimens of written style that contained a pronounced culture-specific element.

The writer subscribes to the view that with English as an international language, the goal in teaching it to Arabs (and this applies, too, to other groups from other nationalities wishing to learn English as an international language) should not be acculturation, but getting the message across and



the message includes a sense of personal identity. It is, in other words, not only the referential function of language that is required, but also its expressive function. It would be interesting to see how foreign language users could be encouraged to 'colour' their English with renderings from their own language so as to assert their own cultural identity. It would be a very limited view to expect the foreigner to forget his identity the moment he speaks English.

To express oneself in a foreign language in an international setting is an extremely difficult task. In order to function as signs, linguistic and paralinguistic/non-verbal features have to be used intentionally, consistently and arbitrarily. In foreign language, there is always an element of doubt about this. The question that is frequently asked by the foreign language user is: does the speaker mean what he says, and on his part as a speaker, does this particular linguistic form precisely reflect his intention? Is the use of one variant instead of another really a matter of choice, deliberate and therefore significant? Is the speaker silent because he lacks the words or is his silence intentional?

The linguistic competence of the foreign language user (especially in the area of grammar and vocabulary among Arab learners of English) is limited. Using English as an international language invites the foreign language user to select (if he can select at all) from a small range of linguistic features. Use of features is neither deliberate nor consistent. There is uncertainty, too, if not, conflict as to the social norms governing behaviour. He has to select from the totality of grammatical expressions available to him forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behaviour in specific encounters. (Gumpers).

The foreign language user is at a loss as to which norms he should follow: the norms of the non-native speaker (i.e. Italian, Japanese, French, Arab) or the norms of the native speaker of English: Does he have to adopt totally the norms of the culture whose language he speaks as a foreign language?

Linguistic features, innocent in themselves, become socially significant only if they hold clearly defined positions within a field of related features. To give an example from British English: the phonological feature of dropping the 'h' co-occurs regularly with such features as informal, colloquial style. Strictly speaking, there are no variants (in the sociolinguistic sense) at all in

non-native speech (if we disregard true bilingualism). Rather there are isolated linguistic features whose social significance is doubtful at best. For instance, the Arab user of English does not have the linguistic competence to react to new social settings within which he can adjust and differentiate, for example, between degrees of intimacy (e.g. friends-acquaintances-strangers) that presuppose different styles.

In English as a foreign language, slang is usually not recommended; but then very informal or slangy variants are very unlikely in non-native speech, just as unlikely as very formal variants. All of these variants presuppose a degree of flexibility on the part of the learner which would be Utopian to strive for among Arab users of English as an international language.

In English, too, there exist phrases meant mainly for the regulation of social relationship and the structuring of discourse. They 'take the edge off' what is being said, soften the blow' of critical remarks or 'lubricate' the conversation. The listener has to have a system of 'translating' these highly conventionalized forms, e.g. into degrees of politeness. More than anything else in language such forms are embedded in the cultural tradition of a society. They are of high importance for communicative competence since society holds them in store for ritualized exchanges, the sociolinguistic do's and don't's.

English has, also, a high degree of explicit, elaborate downtoners. For example, phrases such as 'well', 'I'm afraid I've got a bit of a problem' are used as introduction to confessing that one can't keep a promise or commitment. In other languages different grammatical features to tone utterances down are used. It, thus, seems that it is not the communicative competence that is deficient in speakers of English as an international language, but the linguistic means to express it.

Indeed, Arab users of English apply their cultural norms wrongly to the English setting and infer a degree of intimacy, for example, from the use of first names which frequently is not meant to be implied. For example, English generally uses first names among peers, which is not, however, distinctive as to familiarity. In Arabic, as in French, specific forms are used to express degrees of familiarity linguistically. Arab users of English, and I believe other foreign language users too, regularly identify phatic communion as a major problem area. It is the social uses of the language that are difficult for these

users. For instance, acknowledging a compliment, reciprocating casual remarks beyond comments on the weather are felt to be difficult, just as are commenting on aesthetic or emotional qualities or trying to be witty, sarcastic or comforting. There are, for example, typical comments one has to make as a listener to a story, to show interest or surprise, to encourage the narrator to continue.

A listener not producing responses such as 'oh really'; 'oh no'; 'oh dear'; 'that can't be true' appears to be inattentive or, worse, hostile, again without being aware of it and without a chance of remedying it. A great many of these responses, especially in connection with the authentic intonation, are so culture specific that they are not readily mastered.

Other problems that Arab users of English encounter in the conduct of conversation are turn-taking, 'opening gambits' and 'closing gambits'. Unfortunately, very little is known about the rules governing such encounters. 'Closing gambits' or 'conversational terminators', are on the other hand, of great importance for the presentation of self and the awareness of the other in face-to-face interactions.

Those gambits are a problem because they are indirect means of expression. For instance, the 'lubrication' of conversation gambits are full of concealed cultural values which make them difficult to see through, sometimes antagonistic to the foreign user's system of values, and difficult to memorize because of their complex structure. Politeness formulas, too, are a problem for young users of English simply because they tend to memorize a few widely used phrases and trot them out on all the occasions on which corresponding formulas in their first language would be appropriate.

The problem is that a pair of similar politeness formulas in two languages rarely turn out to be completely equivalent in all respects, while the foreign language learner groping for words is only too happy to assume that they are. A thoughtful discussion of some contrasts between the formulas used by two cultures can show that the true significance of a formula is determined by a complex of cultural and social conventions. (Davies, 1987:77)

The successful language learner must not only know which formulas can be used for the performance of particular illocutionary acts such as greeting

or thanking, but also the kinds of context where such acts can be appropriately performed: the kinds of behaviour felt to call for thanks, the circumstances of meeting where a greeting is appropriate, and so on.

### **Conclusion:**

We should make users of English as an international variety in the Arab World aware of all the problems touched upon briefly in this paper. The acceptance of English as an international communication dialect poses a serious problem, i.e. the problem of uncontrolled grammatical and stylistic degeneration. This communication dialect of English will have to be reauthenticated by a steady inflow of authentic English. Our model is the educated native speaker of English and we have to resort to the lexicogrammar of educated English. As for the native speaker accent, teachers should encourage students to strive very hard to emulate it and if some cannot reach that goal, they should not worry. Smith and Rafiqzad (See Smith and Rafiqzad 1979) question the validity of native accent and native speaking patterns as English models to be emulated by non-natives who are speakers of other languages.

Acculturation is not a realistic aim with regard to the 'lingua franca' use of English and is no longer required by the foreign user. To guarantee the assertion of the sociocultural identity of the Arab learner of English, some existing materials have to be rigorously scanned as to ethnocentricity in content and linguistic features. Some forms in those materials are apparently ethnocentric and will not be accepted especially by older students and adult learners who still view English as the language of the old colonizer of most of the Arab World. With those students questions should be asked : Does the material presented to such adults invite the learner's identification? Does it show consideration of the use of the language by non-natives or does it expect them to take over roles alien to them? Are the paralinguistic aspects of the materials culturally neutral or culture-specific? The solution to such a problem is to develop and empirically validate a set of forms that are not ethnocentric and that learners can manage and accept. There is, indeed, no reason why anyone, because he speaks English, should not follow his own cultural traditions.

Given the massive exposure of the Arab World to the institutions and patterns of the Anglo-American system, the status of equivalence (the target

language learning group should be equivalent to the target language speaking group), which is one of the vital parameters of a successful language learning situation, is, unfortunately superseded by one of cultural and ideological dominance. What ought to be done, then, is the development (at least for older students and adults) of a set of 'intercultural gambits' that are not ethnocentric but are metacommunicative, gambits that must be 'structurally and psycho-socially within the learners' range and at the same time suited to fulfilling the regulatory functions in interactions. These gambits have to be empirically tested with Arab users of English as to their structural manageability for a variety of communicative settings.

The argument is not for a new brand of English in international settings. If the speakers of Arabic are to be permitted their own brand of English, then the speakers of all other languages should be permitted their own brand and that means there should be no international standard English for communicative purposes. We should not isolate the Arabs from that portion of the world that uses English in international communication. As non-native speakers of English, emphasis in learning English for international communication should be laid on the 'non-ethnocentred use' of the language since such use is determined by the job, hobby, or field of study of students.

We are not arguing that Arabs should acculturate International English to their own language/culture, otherwise there could never be an international standard. Some materials that are taught in the Arab World are not related to the students local values, culture, customs and traditions. Alptekin (See Alptekin 1984) subscribes to the view that native speakers of English in the Third World who work as teachers attempt, in their teaching the language, to modify the students' cognitive and affective behaviour so as to concentrate on western values and ideas of the western culture. Such attempts make students (in our case Arab students) hesitate to accept those values and ideas and even to resist them.

Wilkins, too, subscribes (See Wilkins 1975) to the view that the values and cultural traditions which accompany the process of cultural transfer from English speaking countries are often considered alien and thus, considered unacceptable to the indigenous culture of the students. That is why it has been increasingly recognized in contemporary reading texts that the cultural characteristics of the learner should be considered in the development of reading materials and instructional methods.

It has been proved, for instance, that the motivation of Hispanic students studying in the U.S. schools has increased substantially when the reading matter in English textbooks reflected their preferred cultural context. The reading comprehension of those students also improved with the use of translated readres from the Spanish language.

There is no harm in preserving the culture of Arab students when learning English. Arab learners should also be given the chance to comment on the sociocultural norms of their own culture and compare and contrast them with the socio-cultural norms of the native English speaking countries and in this way their own cultural identities could be asserted. In feeling that they are compelled to acquire English as an international language, Arab students (especially the young) resign to a status of subordination as a result of the cultural and ideological dominance of the native speakers of English. In always referring in learning English to the familiar topics and issues that are related to the immediate milieu of the students, Arab's cultural identities are asserted.

There is no harm, too, in encouraging Arab students who learn English as an international language to colour their English with renderings from their language. This is acceptable as long as they are aware that the form is not an authentic English form and should therefore be used only for the particular occasion, a communicative variety created for the time being. The result will be an occasional focus on 'poetic' functions of language (in Roman Jakobson's sense), language that draws attention to itself. This should help to solve the problem of the 'flatness', the expressive poverty of the stylistically unmarked, neutralized foreign use of English. For instance, Arab users of English could refer to idiomatic expressions of their own language and enrich the communication dialect of English with exotic and poetic elements that could be introduced or commented on by 'as we say in Arabic' or 'in Arabic, we have an expression', so that the Arab user can add something from his own language to the variety of English as an international language.

The above are only some of the problems that need to be dealt with in discussing English as an international dialect of communication in the Arab World. More research needs to be done in how to deal with such problems.

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