

The Impact of Arabic Culture on English Language

Learning: An Analysis of Iraqi Students

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تأثير الثقافة العربية على تعلم اللغة الانجليزية : دراسة تحليلية للطلبة العراقيين

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Abstract—

The main thrust of the present study was to investigate the impact of Arabic culture on English language learning among Iraqi students. To this end, students' motivations, challenges, and cultural factors affecting their English proficiency were explored. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory and Gardner's (1985) Socio-Educational Model of Motivation comprised the theoretical model of the present study. 123 Iraqi EFL students participated in the research and took a questionnaire. The questionnaire was selected and adapted from Gardner's Socio-Educational Model and Sociocultural Theory to investigate Iraqi students' motivations, challenges, and cultural influences on English language learning. The data were then coded, thematized, and entered into SPSS22 for further exploration. The findings revealed that cultural background is critical in shaping language learning experiences. Likewise, cultural awareness must be integrated into language instruction to enable educators to bridge cultural gaps and improve English learning outcomes. **Keywords:** Arabic culture, English language learning, Iraqi EFL students, motivation, challenges, cultural influences, Sociocultural Theory, Socio-Educational Model.

1. Background of the Study

Language learning is, in fact, both a cognitive process and a cultural experience (Saienka, 2017). Among various languages, English has become the dominant international language in education, business, and academics. (Crystal, 2003). English has been recognized by many developing countries like Iraq, especially in academic and professional sectors (Sergeant & Erling, 2011). English proficiency is often connected to better career opportunities, higher education access, and international communication (Lengeling & Pablo). However, English is fundamental in various spheres like science, and English learning, Iraqi EFL students encounter numerous challenges, particularly due to the strong impact of Arabic culture on linguistic and cognitive dimensions of language acquisition (Muhammed, 2024). Language and culture are closely interconnected (Bonvillain, 2019). Kramsch (2013) argues that culture adds context and meaning to language, influencing how individuals develop and use linguistic structures. The Sociocultural Theory developed by Vygotsky (1978) considers language learning as a social process influenced by cultural and contextual factors. It is worth mentioning that Iraqi's Arabic cultural background plays a critical role in shaping Iraqi students' attitudes, motivation, and challenges in learning English (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010). Hence, Understanding the impacts of culture on language learning among Iraqi EFL students is crucial since it enables us to develop and implement effective pedagogical strategies that integrate students' cultural identities and learning styles (Agha, 2014). Arabic culture is characterized by a strong oral tradition, collectivist social structures, and religious impacts that develop communication styles (Zaharna, 1995). These cultural dimensions influence English language learning in a variety of ways. For example, Arabic is a Semitic language, and its phonetic, morphological, and syntactic variations are widely different from English (Holes, 2004). These differences lead to challenges for Iraqi students in their processes of learning English, especially in pronunciation, grammar, and writing (Aldahhan & Razak, 2023). Meanwhile, cultural attitudes toward a foreign language, in this case English, may affect students' motivation. In other words, some students may consider English crucial for economic and academic achievement, whereas others may regard it as a threat to cultural identity (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005). These issues are a few challenges Iraqi EFL students face directly or indirectly affecting their

English learning processes. Accordingly, learning a foreign language can be both an empowerment and a potential threat (Norton, 2000). Learning English is critical for students' professional achievement in a positive way, and it is detrimental to students' national and cultural identity in a negative way. Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) add that cultural and national identities are negotiated in the face of a dominant international language, such as English. In Iraq, English is considered a foreign language presented to students at schools and universities. The effectiveness of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) varies due to a variety of variables such as materials, limited exposure to native English speakers, and the predominance of Arabic in daily communication (Ghafar & Amin, 2022). Furthermore, the sociopolitical history of Iraq has impacted English instruction (Stansfield, 2016). In other words, the socio-political situation of Iraq has been unstable due to war and economic crisis (Vongalis-Macrow, 2006). These challenges have resulted in disruptions in educational policies, insufficient teaching resources and materials, and poorly trained English instructors (Makki, 2023). Due to international academic and professional demands, the interest in being native-like in English or at least being well-competent in English has been growing over the past decade. Considering the cultural impact of native language on language learning, incorporating cultural awareness into English instruction appears to be fundamental. In this regard, Chen and Yang (2017) argue that culturally responsive teaching strategies can improve motivation, engagement, and comprehension among language learners. Likewise, in the context of Iraq, integrating Arabic cultural resources into English language programs can help students to make relationships between the content and their native and national culture, which alleviates their feelings of alienation (Obaid et. al., 2019). In addition, enhancing students' intercultural competence equips them with the required strategies to navigate linguistic and cultural differences more effectively (Vaishnav, 2025). Hence Arabic culture and English language learning among Iraqi EFL students are continually interacting. Whereas English is fundamental for academic and professional achievements, cultural factors related to Arabic and Iraq meaningfully exert their effects on students' motivation, challenges, and achievements. Accordingly, explicating the impacts of Iraq's native cultural factors on students' English learning processes may lead to new trends in teaching the English language in Iraq. To this end, the present study tried to provide more details on how Arabic culture impacts English proficiency among Iraqi learners. As it was mentioned Iraqi EFL students' English learning is affected by Arabic linguistic structures, traditions, and social norms (Jaber, 2022). To this end, the impacts of Arabic culture on English learning among EFL students were examined. Exploring the relationship between cultural effects and language learning, the study tried to contribute to the development of effective culturally responsive teaching strategies for Iraqi students. The main impetus for conducting the present study was rooted in the fact that Many Iraqi EFL students face challenges in developing English fluency due to cultural and linguistic barriers (Assaf, 2023). These challenges are composed of phonetic and syntactic differences between Arabic and English along with the influence of traditional learning styles and social norms in which direct and authentic communication is discouraged (Shukri, 2014). As an illustration, many students are inclined towards rote learning which leads to ineffective and inadequate language development (Naiman, 1996). The aforementioned issues indicate the significance of understanding the challenges Iraqi EFL students face, and the cultural factors related to students' native language that hinder the process of English development. Hence, the results of the study may be of interest to teachers, educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers. The results of the study shed light on how Iraqi EFL Students' cultural identity affects their English language development, and how culturally responsive teaching strategies may assist educators and curriculum developers in reconstructing more effective, inclusive, and engaging English language programs in Iraq. The findings of the study can also be of interest to students by clarifying the common challenges they may face and developing required strategies to help them overcome them. To this end, the following questions were addressed:

1. How does Arabic culture influence Iraqi students' English learning experiences?
2. What challenges do Iraqi students face in learning English?
3. How can educators improve English instruction while preserving Arabic cultural values?

2. Methods

2.1. Design of the Study

The present study followed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. The justification for selecting and adapting the mixed-methods design was to gather richer and more dependable data. It is sequential since the two quantitative and qualitative gathering phases were sequential. Meanwhile, it is sequential since the two quantitative and qualitative gathering phases were sequential. First, the quantitative data were gathered through

a structured questionnaire to clarify and explicate general trends in student attitudes, motivations, and challenges in learning English. Then, qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The second phase, i.e., interviews, helped us to gather in-depth insights into the recognized themes. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the design of the study.

Table 1: An overview of the design of the study

Research Design Features	Description
Research Approach	Exploratory Sequential Mixed-Methods
Data Collection Methods	A Structured Questionnaire, Semi-Structured Interviews
Justification	To ensure data richness and validity
Phases	1. Quantitative (questionnaire), 2. Qualitative (interviews)
Data Analysis	Statistical (quantitative), Thematic (qualitative)

2.2. Instrument A structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data on students' motivations, challenges, and cultural influences on English learning. The questionnaire tried to investigate the effect of Arabic language and culture on English learning and identity among Iraqi EFL learners. The instrument included a set of questions designed to collect data on learners' backgrounds, attitudes, challenges, and experiences. The items included in the questionnaire had various formats (closed-ended, multiple-choice, and open-ended items). In addition, semi-structured interviews were employed complementary to the questionnaire. The interviews helped us to elaborate on students' experiences deeply, resulting in a rich depth of cultural and identity-related issues. Table 2 summarizes the instruments employed and their characteristics:

Table 2: An overview of the instruments

Instrument Type	Description
Structured Questionnaire	Quantitative data collection
Semi-Structured Interviews	Qualitative insights
Topics Covered	Background, Motivation, Challenges, Cultural Influence
Question Formats	Closed-ended, Multiple-Choice, Open-Ended
Validation Process	Expert Review, Pilot Testing

2.3. Participants of the Study The participants of the study were 230 Iraqi EFL students from Samara University who were studying English language literature. Participants were selected voluntarily to ensure ethical considerations.

Table 3: Demographic features of the participants

Characteristics of the Participants	Features
Total Participants	230
University	Samara University
Major	English Language Literature or TEFL
Age Range	18 - 25 years
Selection Criteria	Voluntary Participation
Gender Distribution	Male: 120, Female: 110

As Table 3 shows all participants were from Samara University, studying English Language Literature or Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). The participants were studying at undergraduate or graduate levels, and their ages were between 18 and 25 years. Moreover, 120 of the participants were males, and 110 were females.

2.4. Data Gathering and Analysis Procedures A Google Forms questionnaire was developed by the researcher with eight sections covering background, attitudes, cultural influences, challenges, and identity shifts. It should be noted that all Participants signed and declared their consent for participating in the study. The responses were gathered over four weeks in November 2024. Meanwhile, the validity and reliability of the items were examined through expert review. The questionnaire was also administered among a similar group of students (52) to improve unclear questions. To analyze the data, percentages, and frequencies were employed for closed-ended items and thematization for open-ended questions and interview items. Table 4 sheds light on data gathering and analysis procedures:

Table 4: Data gathering and analysis procedures of the study

Data Collection and Analysis	Details
Questionnaire Format	Google Forms
Data Collection Period	Four Weeks (November 2024)
Validity and Reliability	Expert Review, Pilot Testing
Pre-Test Sample	52 Students

Quantitative Analysis	Percentages, Frequencies, Inferential Statistics
Qualitative Analysis	Thematic Coding

3. Findings To investigate the impact of Arabic culture on English language learning among Iraqi students, motivations, challenges, and cultural factors affecting their English proficiency were explored. The findings of the study led to insights related to students' motivations, challenges, and cultural influences on English learning among Iraqi EFL learners. **Table 5:** Students' Motivation, Cultural Influence, Challenges, and Identity Shifts in English Learning

Category	Key Findings
Motivation	75% of students reported learning English for career advancement.
Cultural Influence	60% stated that Arabic influences their English pronunciation.
Challenges	80% mentioned a lack of exposure to native speakers.
Identity Shift	55% felt their identity was influenced by learning English.

Table 5 illustrates the key findings of the study regarding the motivations, challenges, cultural influences, and identity shifts among Iraqi EFL learners. As the table shows, 75% of the students reported that their primary motivation for learning English was professional achievement. In addition, 60% of the students mentioned that their Arabic language affected their English pronunciation adversely. In other words, these participants indicated the cultural effects of their native language. Likewise, one of the main challenges Iraqi EFL students face is interference from their native language. Moreover, 80% of the participants referred to limited exposure to native speakers, indicating non-authentic use of English. Hence, the lack of native speakers of English and inauthentic use of English contribute to Iraqi EFL students' challenges with fluency and practical language skills. Furthermore, 55% of the students declared that their identity had been influenced by learning English. It indicates that language learning plays a role in developing personal and cultural identity, particularly when engaging with a foreign language like English. Based on the aforementioned issues, 60% of students reported that Arabic affects their English pronunciation, denoting the impact of their native language (Arabic) on their English language skills. This effect could be due to differences in the phonology system between Arabic and English. 80% of students reported that the lack of exposure to native speakers of English and authentic situations for English use is a significant challenge in their English learning journey. Moreover, 75% of students expressed that implementing Arabic cultural values into English instruction is important. In other words, they referred to the need for cultural relevance in learning English. They also mentioned that preserving their cultural identity is essential while developing English is essential. From the open-ended responses, students mentioned several ways that Arabic culture affects their English learning experiences:

Table 6: Impact of Arabic Culture on English Learning Experiences

Theme	Percentage of Responses
Cultural Identity and Expression	40%
Grammar and Syntax	35%
Cultural Values and Traditions	25%

40% of the participants mentioned that their Arabic cultural identity affects their capability to express themselves in English. They often face challenges related to language transfer, where Arabic expressions and norms affect their English usage. 35% of participants mentioned that Arabic grammar structures influence their understanding and use of English grammar, especially word order, sentence structure, and tense formation. 25% of students reported that Arabic cultural norms, including those related to family and religion, may make it difficult to fully merge themselves in the English language. **Table 7:** Challenges in Learning English

Challenge	Percentage of Responses
Pronunciation and Fluency	30%
Grammar and Vocabulary	35%
Lack of Practice in Real-Life Contexts	20%
Over-reliance on Arabic	15%

30% of participants reported that pronunciation and fluency are the main challenges rooted in the differences in phonology systems between Arabic and English. This causes issues, especially with sounds that do not exist in Arabic. 35% of them indicated that the grammar structure of English, including articles, tenses, and prepositions, is particularly difficult for Arabic speakers. The challenge is exacerbated because these elements are often not used in Arabic. Moreover, 20% of students mentioned that there isn't authentic exposure to English, and they have not experienced authentic English use. Furthermore, 15% of students reported that when

they face difficulties in English, they restore to Arabic, which hinders them from developing English proficiency. **Table 8: Suggestions for Improving English Instruction**

Suggestion	Percentage of Responses
Contextual Learning	30%
Interactive and Immersive Techniques	25%
Respecting Traditions	25%
Creating a Safe Environment	20%

30% of the students suggested that cultural examples and real-life contexts can be integrated into English lessons to make the learning process more relevant and engaging. 25% of participants also suggested that interactive teaching methods, such as group discussions and role-playing activities, can be implemented into EFL programs to improve fluency and make English learning more authentic. 25% of participants stated that Arabic cultural values need to be respected and prioritized by integrating discussions around cultural differences, or by developing bilingual teaching materials to bridge both cultures. Meanwhile, 20% of students referred to the importance of developing a supportive and engaging learning environment in the classrooms where students feel secure using English without the fear of making mistakes.

3. Discussion & Pedagogical Implications

The present study investigated the impacts of Arabic culture on English learning among Iraqi EFL students. It was shown that most students are motivated to learn English mainly for professional achievements (75%), but they face challenges rooted in both linguistic and cultural factors. A main challenge, faced by the participants of the study, was the lack of exposure to native English speakers (80%), which restricted their opportunities to communicate authentically and improve their fluency. Moreover, Arabic language impacts are a major factor affecting students' English, especially pronunciation (60%), grammar, and sentence structure. It was discussed that it is rooted in differences between English and Arabic. Meanwhile, cultural dimensions were found to play an essential role in students' learning experiences. Many students reported difficulties in expressing themselves in English due to their strong Arabic cultural identity (40%), the influence of Arabic grammar (35%), and traditional values (25%). Hence, it has made it challenging for them to engage with English. Furthermore, 55% of students also mentioned that learning English has influenced their personal and cultural identity. It is critically challenging for them to navigate between preserving their Arabic identity and adopting English culture. To improve English instruction, cultural and real-life contexts were suggested by 30% of students, interactive methods by 25%, respecting Arabic traditions by 25%, and developing engaging, supportive classroom environments by 20%. The first question addressed by the present study was: How does Arabic culture influence Iraqi students' English learning experiences? It was shown that Arabic culture has affected Iraqi students' English learning experiences through pronunciation and phonology, grammar and syntax, cultural expression and identity, cultural values and traditions, motivation and desire for cultural preservation, and challenges in integrating the two Arabic and English cultures. In effect, research confirms that first language (L1) interference from Arabic significantly influences the phonological accuracy of English learners (e.g. Assaf, 2023; Belkina, O. V., & Kolova, 2022; Yavas, 2011; Al-Saidat, 2010; Eckman, 2008; Hansen, 2001; Selinker, 1972). Also, Studies have revealed that L1 grammar structures strongly influence second language (L2) learning (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Ellis, 1994; Corder, 1981). The related literature has also illustrated that learners struggle to communicate effectively, and it is mainly rooted in their incompetencies in cultural factors (Hall, 1997; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). As an illustration, Arabic social norms, including politeness strategies and indirect communication, contradict English norms (Tannen, 1984; Al-Issa, 2003; Farooq, 2015; Hinkel, 1999; Al-Khatib, 2001). The related literature also showed that students' cultural values shape their participation, willingness to speak, and their perception of appropriate classroom behaviors (Hofstede, 2001; Gudykunst, 2004). So, these values may interfere with the learning processes of a language that is phonologically and structurally different from the native language as English. The related literature also revealed that cultural relevance in the classroom can support students' motivation, and reduce feelings of cultural loss (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ushioda, 2011; Lamb, 2004; Noels, 2003; Al-Hassan, 2012). Likewise, integrating Arabic cultural topics with English lessons can strengthen students' motivation and identity security (Kramsch, 2009; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Ibrahim, 2005; Al-Issa, 2014; Brown, 2007). The significance of safe, inclusive classrooms where cultural identity is respected while new language identities are explored has been emphasized by previous studies, too (e.g. Cummins, 2000; Menard-Warwick, 2009; Morgan, 2004; Byrd Clark, 2009; Duff, 2012). The findings of the study indicate that we need to incorporate culturally responsive teaching that integrates students'

cultural identity into the language learning process. Teachers are recommended to incorporate familiar cultural themes, values, and examples into lessons to make learning more meaningful and especially related to students' native norms to address language transfer issues such as phonological and grammatical differences between Arabic and English. Developing a supportive and respectful learning environment is critical to encourage engagement, reduce anxiety, and build confidence, especially in situations where students fear losing their cultural identity. Moreover, materials and textbooks should reflect both Arabic and English cultural contexts, and teachers should enhance intercultural communication skills to equip students with the required strategies to navigate differences in communication styles. Meanwhile, Providing real-life, interactive, and engaging learning opportunities and culturally relevant content can improve students' motivation. In other words, engaging and supporting educational environments help students see English's practical and personal value without sacrificing their Arabic heritage. Language and culture are closely intertwined, and their separation is almost impossible. As Wei (2005) points out, "Language has a dual character: both as a tool of communication and a carrier of culture" (p. 56). In addition, Brown (1994) argues that "a language is part of a culture and a culture is part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the importance of either language or culture" (as cited in Jiang, 2000, p. 328). Likewise, effective language teaching demands incorporating cultural teaching. Gao (2006) adds that "language learning is culture learning and consequently, language teaching is cultural teaching" (p. 59). Wang (2008) declares that "foreign language teaching is foreign culture teaching, and foreign language teachers are foreign culture teachers." Tomalin (2008) introduces the idea of culture as the "fifth language skill," next to the common four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. He argues that this skill instructs learners to adapt their language use to appreciate and understand cultural differences. It reminds intercultural competency which means that "it is an attitudinal change that is articulated through the use of language." (Tomalin, 2008, p. 93) Culture significantly affects language skills, including vocabulary, listening, speaking, and even translation. Vocabulary can show cultural differences, such as the meaning of colors or food names across cultures. For instance, in Yemen, white is a reflection of purity and is worn at weddings, while in China, white is mainly related to funerals, and in Arabic culture, black is worn for this event. Hence, "learning a language implies not only the knowledge of its grammar rules...but also the cultural phenomena" that shape a language. It is worth mentioning that all dimensions of language are affected by its culture similarly.

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