



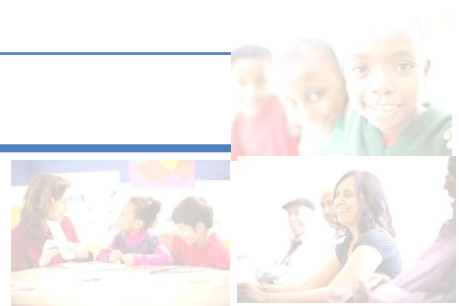
---

## Language information

---

### Arabic

---



Language information booklets provide teachers of EAL learners with some information on their first languages (or languages of previous education) and on cultural aspects. Typical differences between these languages and English have been highlighted to make teachers aware where these learners might need additional support.

It is important to note, however, that these are guidelines and that individual learners may not find the areas mentioned here difficult.

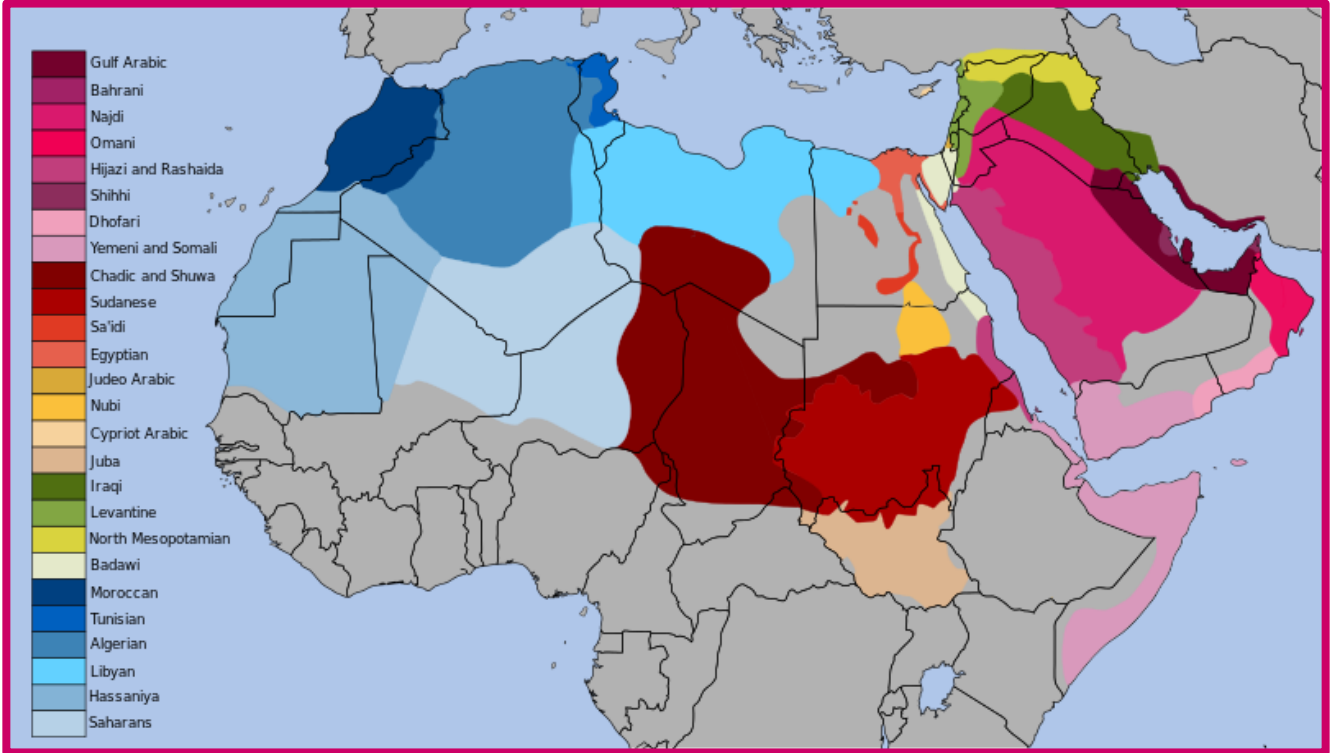
For more specific information on languages and their scripts you may want to visit <http://www.omniglot.com/>.

If you wish to print this booklet for colleagues working with EAL learners from this language background, we recommend you use the booklet settings on your printer.

# العربية - Arabic



## Map



## Writing sample

This is Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Arabic:

يولد جميع الناس أحراراً متساوين في الكرامة والحقوق. وقد وهبوا عقلاً وضميراً وعليهم أن يعامل بعضهم بعضاً بروح الإخاء.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

(Listen to a recording on <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/arabic.htm> )

# Facts

Language family	Semitic (Afro-Asiatic)
Number of speakers	400 million (290 million native speakers)
Official language	22 countries of the Arab League which spans from northwest Africa to southwest Asia
Minority language	Eritrea, Mali, Niger, Kenya, Chad, Senegal, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Iran, Turkey, Madagascar, Tanzania, Mozambique etc.
Writing system	Arabic script (vocalised or unvocalised), which is read from right to left
Main religion	Islam (language of the Qur'an; liturgical language of Islam)

## Names

Traditionally Arabic names consist of five parts: the **kunya** (honorific name such as Abu or Haji), the **ism** (given name which usually has a meaning, e.g. Omar or Ayesha), the **nasab** (patronymic, which is the father's name usually preceded by ibn or bin (son of) or bint (daughter of)), the **laqab** (religious or descriptive name, e.g. al-Rashid) and the **nisba** (surname that may indicate occupation, tribe or region, e.g. al-Attar).

Naming may vary according to region and degree of westernisation. The personal name may be followed by those of the father and grandfather. E.g. grandfather = Abbas Ali, father = Hussein Abbas Ali, son = Salam Hussain Abbas, daughter = Jamila Hussein Abbas. The personal name may come after the family name, e.g. in Algerian names.

Traditionally women do not change their names upon marriage.

## Cultural differences

One of the greatest Arabic social values is hospitality. Declining a drink or snack might be considered offensive by Arabic hosts. Also, if guests admire something, the Arabic host is likely to give it to them. Whilst not accepting the gift would be rude, showing great admiration for something might be seen as impolite as well.

The dress code for women is traditionally very conservative and public shows of affection for one's partner is not part of Arabic culture and is even illegal in some countries. Instead of shaking someone's hand, Arabs sometimes put their hand on their chest, especially if greeting a person of the opposite sex.

## Language and people

Since Arabic is spoken in such an extensive area, from North Africa to the Middle East, there are immense differences. Unlike English spoken in the UK, the USA, Australia and elsewhere, some Arabic dialects (see map) are mutually unintelligible. This means that Arabic speakers might have difficulties in understanding each other, especially if they have not learned the Modern Standard Arabic, which they usually refer to as Classical Arabic. Strictly speaking Classical Arabic is the language of the Qur'an from which modern varieties have derived. Modern Standard Arabic is universal in the Arab world and is used in the media and official communication.

Arabic being the language of the Qur'an means that Muslims from other (predominantly African and Asian)

countries are to some extent familiar with its structure. Learning the Qur'an however is often an exercise of rote memorisation without thorough analysis as to the meaning of the individual words.

Therefore not everybody who has learned the Qur'an is able to understand Arabic. People from various non-Arabic speaking Asian and African countries will recognise individual words which have been adopted as loan words in their languages.

Arabic is a Semitic language that differs greatly from English and other Indo-European languages. The phonology is different regarding individual sounds and sound combinations. The morphology is based on a logical system of three-consonant roots, which are put into different patterns by adding prefixes and suffixes and by changing the vowel sounds to mark derivations and syntactical functions. The word order and tense system varies significantly from English.

## Education

Learners from Arabic countries can be expected to have a positive attitude towards learning. However, there may be rejection towards modern western teaching methods focusing on eliciting answers and critical personal comments as part of assessed pupil performance. Informal teaching methods and teachers who do not act as authorities may also be rejected.

As the sexes are traditionally segregated in public life in Arabic countries (including schools), learners might be unfamiliar with mixed schools and less formal interactions between students and teachers of the opposite sex.

# What may be new, unusual or difficult for Arabic speakers when learning English

## Phonology

The phonology of Arabic is significantly different to the phonology of English. Therefore native speakers of Arabic may have the following problems when acquiring English:

- ◆ Short vowels in words such as **pen**, **pin** and **pun** may not be distinguished properly by Arabic speakers as they are almost allophonic in Arabic.
- ◆ Diphthongs may rather sound like vowels: Arabic learners may pronounce the word **gate** like **get** and the word **hope** like **hop**. The long vowel in **caught** might be confused with the short one in **cot**.
- ◆ There is no schwa (short **e** sound) in Arabic, so the letter **e** is likely to be stressed when it should not be. Diphthongs with schwa in words such as **fear** and **bear** tend to be difficult for Arabic speakers.
- ◆ As consonants are very important in Arabic, learners show a reluctance to silent consonants and rather pronounce e.g. **climbed** as \***clime-bed**.
- ◆ **g** and **k**, **p** and **b** as well as **f** and **v** are allophonic in Arabic. Learners thus may say **goat** instead of **coat**, **bay** instead of **pay** and **fan** instead of **van**.
- ◆ The letters **h** and **r** are most likely to be over-pronounced or sounding harsh.
- ◆ Learners often use **d** or **t** when reading **th**.
- ◆ Some dialects have problems with the pronunciation of **ch**, learners may say **shin** or **tin** instead of **chin**.
- ◆ Consonant clusters – especially at the beginning of words – are likely to be mispronounced.
- ◆ Word and sentence stress may cause problems for Arabic speakers.

# Grammar

- ◆ Arabic native speakers usually find it hard to grasp that the same word can have different functions in a sentence (verb or adjective, noun or verb) because they are used to clear patterns.
- ◆ As the verb is placed first in Arabic, learners may struggle with the Subject – Verb – Object word order in English.

Other common mistakes observed in learners with Arabic as their first language include:

- ◆ omission of **do** negatives and questions;
- ◆ confusion of **where** and **when** (as the Arabic word for *where* sounds like *when*);
- ◆ omission of forms of **be** in the present tense;
- ◆ incorrect use or omission of personal pronouns;
- ◆ reference to things with **she** or **he** instead of **it** (being used to nouns marked for gender) and to the plural with **she** instead of **they**;
- ◆ incorrect use of relative pronouns (e.g. **which** for people);
- ◆ no distinction between present progressive and simple present, omission of **be** in present progressive forms;
- ◆ present perfect instead of past tense;
- ◆ incorrect forms of past perfect (using **be** instead of **have**) and past progressive;
- ◆ incorrect tenses in reported speech (as there is no backshift in Arabic);
- ◆ incorrect tenses in conditional sentences;
- ◆ misunderstanding of modal auxiliaries and unidiomatic ways of expressing modality, e.g. saying **\*From the possible that I go** instead of **May I go**);
- ◆ incorrect use of non-finite forms (**-ing** forms) saying e.g. **\*I enjoy I play** instead of **I enjoy playing**;
- ◆ misunderstanding and avoidance of the passive voice as it is rare in Arabic;
- ◆ incorrect use of or omission of articles (especially the indefinite articles *a* and *an*);
- ◆ problems of grasping the genitive **'s**;
- ◆ adjectives may be placed after the noun;
- ◆ use of the adjective instead of the adverb, e.g. saying **\*he speaks loud**;
- ◆ incorrect prepositions;
- ◆ omission of prepositions in phrasal verbs;
- ◆ grammatically incorrect question tags, though familiar with the concept.

## Writing

- ◆ Arabic speakers who have no prior knowledge of the Roman script will have to get used to it. When they form Roman letters they often start on the right as Arabic is written from right to left.
- ◆ Misreading letters with mirror shapes, e.g. **p** and **q** and **d** and **b** is quite common for Arabic speakers (as it is for those who are literate in the Roman script when learning Arabic). Another common reading and writing mistake is exchanging two letters: **twon** instead of **town** or **form** instead of **from**.
- ◆ Arabic does not always write short vowels, Arabic speakers must consequently get used to this and to a spelling system that is not phonetic.
- ◆ As there are no upper and lower case letters in Arabic, capitals – or rather the distinction between upper and lower case letters – cause problems for learners.
- ◆ Numerals in Arabic are different to the ‘Arabic’ numerals used in Europe. They are read from left to right though.
- ◆ Punctuation is freer in Arabic and some punctuation marks are inverted.

## Vocabulary

There are some words English has borrowed from Arabic, e.g. **alcohol**, **algebra**, **coffee**, **cotton**, **lemon** and **sugar**. Other than that there is no positive transfer and there are only very few technical words Arabic has borrowed from English. This means that learners with Arabic as their first language have to learn all the words and the acquisition of vocabulary may take considerably longer compared to the time it may take speakers of Indo-European languages.

Teachers should be aware that the English words **zip**, **zipper**, **air**, **tease**, **kiss**, **cuss**, **nick** and **unique** sound similar to vulgar words in Arabic.

Other languages spoken in the region may influence the vocabulary which is used. For example, there are more French loanwords in Maghrebi Arabic because of the French colonisation.

## References

Arabic language. 2014. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Retrieved 08 November, 2014, from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/31677/Arabic-language>  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/other/arabic/guide/facts.shtml> (accessed 08/11/14)

Bußmann, Hadumod (1990), *Lexikon der Sprachwissenschaft*. 2., völlig neu bearbeitete Auflage.- Stuttgart: Kröner.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_language) (accessed 08/11/14)

Notzon, Ben and Gayle Nesson (2005), *The Arabic Naming System*. In: *Science Editor*, January – February, Vol 28 , No 1  
<http://www.councilscienceeditors.org/wp-content/uploads/v28n1p020-021.pdf> (accessed 08/11/14)

<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/arabic.htm> (accessed 08/11/14)

Swan, Michael and Bernard Smith (2001), *Learner English*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. A teacher's guide interference and other problems.- Cambridge: CUP.