Teaching English through Drama to Arab Learners:
A Theoretical Account

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Abstract
This paper accounts for teaching English to Arab learners through dramatic works to facilitate their learning of English as a foreign language (EFL). The study, based on a review of the relevant literature, proposes English drama as a gateway to teaching EFL to Arab learners. It advocates plays as a useful means for addressing the linguistic challenges that mainly relate to vocabulary, syntax, and figurative language. The study rationalizes selecting plays with themes relevant to Arab learners' socio-cultural experiences and interests. A purposeful selection of plays helps in exploring universal themes and accepting cultural diversity, fostering a deeper understanding of other places and eras. In studying plays, learners engage with characters, dialogue, and emotions. Dramatic techniques, such as role-playing, scene analysis, and live performances encourage active participation and enhance comprehension and appreciation. Above all, comparing Western plays with learners' literary traditions (e.g., Arabic poetry, folklore, or theatre) promotes critical thinking, cross-cultural awareness, and much more.

Keywords: Arab Learners, Arab Culture, Drama, Teaching English

Introduction

The differences between Western and Arab cultures have often been seen as sources of prejudice and misunderstanding. However, sharing common languages can help prevent hostility and promote mutual understanding between these cultures (Alkire & Alkire, 2007; Choudhury, 2016; Denman, 2012). For instance, learning English helps lessen friction between Arabs and Western communities. English has been widely taught in Arab countries, as in many other countries, where a need for it as a foreign language is undeniable (Al-Khulaidi & Abdulkhalek, 2022). In Saudi Arabia, English is a mandatory subject in all state schools as the primary foreign language; however, its instruction has traditionally relied heavily on memorization (Shukri, 2014).

Due to the complexity of teaching English in a context where that language is not widely used for day-to-day interaction, this study is concerned with learning English through drama. It advocates plays for learning English to encounter the challenges the Arab EFL learners face when they come to learn English in their local contexts, showing how Western plays help to overcome the cultural divide between the two cultures. The study is based on existing literature on education in the Arab world, taking Saudi Arabia as an example with which the author is familiar.

English Language in Saudi Arabia

Using Saudi Arabia as a representative example of Arab countries and Arab culture, the educational system is deeply rooted in the traditional values and spiritual aspirations of the Saudi people. An educational system reflects the culture of the civilisation that produced it. In this respect, Middle Eastern systems of education are no exception. Choudhury (2016) observes that schooling in Saudi Arabia is governed by Islamic law and moral codes. In the context of universal education, a distinctive community cannot be facilitated intrinsically with an imported model of education that has its roots in a different socio-linguistic milieu; such an approach is doomed to failure. According to Shukri (2014), Arab society is perceived as a diglossic speech community wherein language has two forms, i.e. ordinary and classical. Colloquial Arabic exists in many vernacular forms in major Arabic-speaking nation-states. Classical Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, provides the common and standard written form of the Arabic tongue.

English is now one of the major subjects in the educational system of Saudi Arabia. According to Choudhury (2016), students in the country, as elsewhere, evaluate their lives and cultures based on Western perspectives and standards, which has resulted in the acquisition of better proficiency in the English language and a degree of familiarity with Western culture. It has been stated that translations of numerous European works of fiction and poetry are a direct result of the growing interest in Western culture (Lewis, 1993). As these were available to readers across North Africa, Central Asia, and Arabia in the dominant languages of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, they may initially have appeared to offer no direct infringement upon traditional Muslim cultures as in Saudi Arabia. However, Lewis (1993) states that as the number of translation works grows, a culture of literary mimicry begins to emerge. Mimicry, imitating the colonisers' mannerisms and way of life, involves adopting the coloniser's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values. According to Alkire and Alkire (2007), what separates Muslims from Western culture relates directly to moral and religious concerns. This divide is a result of the secular Western worldview versus the Arab-Muslim one. This encompasses potentially dramatic implications for the place of Western literary works in the English-language classroom.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory on Development and Language Acquisition

According to Newman and Holzman (2013), Vygotsky brought Marx's insights to bear on the practical question of how human beings learn and develop. Vygotsky's (1981) model of psychology states that the unique feature of an individual's development with respect to

cultural and species development is qualitative and transformative (unlike behaviour change, which is particularistic and cumulative). Humans are not just stimuli-reactive; they also learn skills that are helpful in society and adjust to their surroundings. Human social life is special because the conditions that determine things are subject to change. Therefore, human development is a sociocultural process rather than an individual achievement.

According to Holzman (2009), Vygotsky is the precursor to the "new psychology of becoming," which posits that individuals recognise the communal aspect of their life and the potency of group creativity in generating novel instruments for personal development. Moreover, Holzman (2013) states that humans get a sense of the dialectical process of existence and transformation when we observe how infants are acknowledged both for their current state (i.e. babbling babies) and for what they are yet to become (articulate speakers). This dual recognition is crucial for their development as language users. The synergy of meaning-making and learning-led development serves as both the instrument and outcome of human evolution. This fusion occurs within self-determined communities, intentionally crafted spaces where linguistic and historical narratives unfold, and where the importance of history and societal dialectics is not just acknowledged but celebrated.

Vygotsky challenges the received wisdom that language merely expresses thought: "Speech does not merely serve as the expression of developed thought. The thought is restructured as it transformed into speech. The thought is not expressed but *completed* in the word." (Newman & Holzman 2013, my emphasis) Language is composed of sounds carrying meanings; 'meaning' is a function of the relationship between language and the receiver. Written words are symbols for spoken words (Cecil, 2017). This is another instance of Vygotsky's dialectical understanding of human activity; Vygotsky's 'speaking completing thinking' is a Wittgensteinian 'form of life.' (Newman & Holzman, 2013)

Children learn to speak by being spoken to and having their first words and phrases elaborated upon. Similarly, some children learn to read in this way without direct instruction. The National Reading Panel in 2000 identified five essential components of early reading success, which are also important for second-language learning: first, phonemic awareness, the ability to hear and identify sounds in spoken words; second, phonics, the relationship between the letters of written language and the sounds of spoken language; third, fluency, the capacity to read accurately, quickly, and with expression; fourth, vocabulary acquisition, the words children must know to communicate effectively; and fifth, comprehension, the ability to understand and gain meaning from what has been read (Cecil, 2017).

Developing EFL Learners' Communication Systems

The four systems responsible for communication and which EFL learners need to develop are the grapho-phonological system, the syntactic system, the semantic system, and the pragmatic system. In the grapho-phonological system, there are between 44 and 48 sounds (or *phonemes*) in the English language and students need to learn to pronounce these sounds in many different combinations as they begin to speak. Teachers should support learners by demonstrating how these sounds correspond to letters (or *graphemes*); modelling how to pronounce words; calling attention to rhyming words and alliterations, and directly teaching other decoding skills.

The syntactic system governs how a language is structured or how words are combined into sentences; teachers support this cueing system by showing students how to combine sentences; add suffixes to root words; use punctuation and inflectional endings; and write simple, compound and complex sentences. The semantic system concerns meaning-making and vocabulary; teachers support it by providing meaningful literature and relevant reading topics, focusing students' attention on the meaning of words, discussing multiple meanings of words, and introducing synonyms, antonyms and homonyms. Pragmatics address the social and cultural functions of language; teachers should show how different forms of language are appropriate for different situations (Cecil, 2017)

One way to complement the development of critical literacy skills is the selection of a wide range of English-language literature drawn from Kachru's outer- and expanding-circle

nations (Denman, 2012). The outer circle comprises former British dominions where English is still widely employed as a second or common language. The expanding circle, on the other hand, consists of those nations without direct experience of British rule but where English now plays an important role.

English-language literature emanating from these outer and expanding circles, therefore, not only demonstrates a variety of communicative means typifying the different cultures from which it is drawn but also offers learners examples of how a language often assumed to exclusively convey western values can be appropriated to express a diverse range of socio-cultural identities (Schiffman, 2012). Therefore, readers of literary works from these circles, apart from being far less likely to encounter the cultural divides explored above, will also encounter means of using English in a way that can potentially empower rather than marginalise them (Degani & Delanoy, 2023).

Teaching English Through Literature

Based on the approach of teaching English through literature (Hişmanoğlu, 2005; Oyama, 2022), the study covers drama as one genre of literature and suggests it as a bridging tool between Arab and Western cultures. It underscores including Western plays in the EFL curriculum in an attempt to leverage the complexity of teaching English by suggesting more motivational techniques to the students, i.e., using plays. As will become clear in this paper, drama is imbued with cultural beliefs, values, and linguistic devices that can be harnessed for learning the target language. In this sense, language is defined as a socio-cultural device of communication. Drama in this study is discussed in relation to Arabic and Western cultures, and it is proposed for revitalizing learning and teaching English.

According to Khan (2011), the number of people who use English as a means of communication far exceeds those who speak it as their mother tongue in Anglophone countries such as the UK, USA, and Australia. English has been the tongue of colonial discoveries, racial cruelties, invented names, simulated tribal cultures, and the unheard literature of dominance in tribal culture; at the same time, this mother tongue of para-colonialism has been a language of liberation for many tribal people (Kharbe, 2009). Today, English has reached a status which not many languages have achieved. Starting from its humble origin as a language spoken by the Anglo-Saxons who were not 'highly civilised' compared to the Romans, the language has developed into what it is now, i.e. an important language of science and the internet (Al-Kadi & Ahmed, 2018; Kharbe, 2009). English as currently spoken is a hybrid cosmopolitan language. It has grown from global to local, transforming itself into the 'glocal' language. In fact, the acculturation of non-native languages has a long tradition in the developing world (Al-Kadi & Ahmed, 2018). Joe Lockard (cited in Kharbe, 2009) alleges that "English must be practised as an open field rather than a linguistic prison house where involuntary Anglophones do hard time behind the steel bars of alien grammar." (p. 45)

According to Denman (2012), perhaps the most popular conceptualisation of English's antecedents as the world's current *lingua franca* tends to adhere fairly closely to that presented in Phillipson's (2018) linguistic imperialism. In brief, Phillipson argues that the British Empire systematically imposed English upon their foreign subjects to dilute local beliefs. In this way, they proffered Britain's preordained 'superiority' as a justification of inequalities between the rulers and ruled. Alkire and Alkire's (2007) two basic cultural divides (imperialistic and moral/religious divide) therefore encompass a wide array of concerns ranging from stereotyping born of ignorance to opposing values that underlie everything from textual structure to word selection and intended meaning.

Given the significant differences between the semiotic systems of English and Arabic, the likelihood of mutual unintelligibility is high. Moreover, the nature of this divide is not limited to the views and beliefs underlying Western literary work, but can even be witnessed (Denman, 2012). Al-Attas' (1980) theory of basic Islamic vocabulary maintains that the language of the Muslim world is imbued with ideas and constructs, including those related

to God, knowledge, happiness, truth, and so on, according to the beliefs and traditions of Islam. The same concepts in English, according to Al-Attas (1980), are influenced by non-religious traditions and hence are fundamentally different from their Arabic counterparts (Denman, 2012).

However, forewarning students about Western-originating literature may not only rob them of the chance to experience English in the full flight of its expression but may also be an act of what Brutt Griffler terms linguistic paternalism (cited in May 2005). Al-Attas (1980) lends support to this argument, stating that only those students who are poorly versed in Islamic ideals are vulnerable to cultural deracination through exposure to English (Denman, 2012). In the 2008 national report on education development in Saudi Arabia, prepared by the Saudi Ministry of Education, "[e]ducational policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia emanates from Islam, which is the state belief, worship, ethics, law, and life integrated system." (cited in Choudhury 2016, p. 11).

Difficulties learning English in Arab countries

EFL learners face several problems in their course of studying the English language. Khan (2011) found that Arab learners of English encounter problems in speaking. Pronunciation or sound system is the first and foremost aspect of the target language, in which the learners face difficulties while speaking. Arguably, the three main difficulties students face while speaking English are inhibition, linguistic difficulties and mother tongue interference. Students struggle to find the appropriate vocabulary item when trying to speak in English, which reflects their insufficient vocabulary. Instead of discussing their ideas in English, they shift to Arabic because of inadequate vocabulary repertoire and weak sentence-building skills. Al Hosni found (2014) that student participation in class activities was very limited, with fear of making mistakes in front of classmates given as the main reason.

Most English learners make linguistic mistakes of syntax and pronunciation as a result of the interference of their L1. This is popularly known as L1 transfer or 'interlingual error' (Khan, 2011). The pattern of an Arabic sentence widely differs from that of English. Arab students' errors in writing mainly fall in the category of syntax and grammar, and such errors can be categorised into seven syntactic subcategories: prepositions, verbs, articles, conjunctions, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and sentence structure. The errors in writing are syntactical, especially in prepositions and verbs. Phoneme clusters, spelling, grammar, mistakes due to L1 interference, structure, doubling of subjects, doubling of prepositions, tenses, articles, appropriate vocabulary, and wrong use of prefixes and suffixes are other tricky areas (Javid & Umer, 2014).

The faults in Arab EFL learning that Kambal (1980) noted were related to students' weaknesses in using tenses, verb structure, and subject-verb agreement. This fact has been clearly stated by many researchers, for example, Abdul Haq (1982) and Harrison et al. (1975). In Jordan, many studies investigated the lexical, syntactical, and phonological errors committed by Jordanian learners of English. Kambal (1980) reported on three main types of errors in verb usage: verb formation, tense, and subject-verb agreement and discussed errors in tense under five categories: tense sequence, tense substitution, tense marker, deletion, and confusion of perfect tenses. With regard to subject-verb agreement, three types of errors were identified: the third-person singular marker used redundantly and the incorrect form of the verb 'to be.'

Abdul Haq found (1982) that a majority of Arab students frequently struggled with the skill of writing in English. In his study, Abdul Haq also revealed that most English instructors and university officials complained about the continuous deterioration of English language skills among the students. Another study conducted by Zughoul (1984) confirmed the findings of Abdul Haq and revealed that most Jordanian students enrolled in EFL classes have poor oral communication skills, as they usually make errors of lexical type. Similar problems were also reported in Sudan (Hago & Ali, 2015), as most students enrolled in English classes usually make serious syntactic errors in the composition of English passages. Hago and Ali found that learners usually transferred the stylistic features of their first language (Arabic) to

the target language (English); for example, they tended to write long sentences with coordinating conjunctions, repetition and argument through presentation and elaboration.

In a wide-scale study about the problems being faced by Arab students, Mukattash (1983) observed that there are two categories of problems: first, most errors committed were related to sophisticated pronunciation, morphology, knowledge of syntax, and spelling; second, most Arab students had difficulty expressing themselves confidently and competently either when faced with scholarly subjects or commonplace everyday issues.

In addition to the problem (reported by Javid and Umer, 2014) of rote learning without understanding grammatical rules and lexical items, another reason behind the grade-oriented behaviour of Saudi EFL learners is that a significant number lack intrinsic motivation and are instead motivated by extrinsic factors to learn English (Gazdar, 1985). Abdul Haq (1982) states that "one of the linguistic areas in which students in the secondary cycle commit errors is the writing skill, [and] there are general outcries about the continuous deterioration of the standards of English proficiency of students among schoolteachers, university instructors and all who are concerned with English language teaching." In support of Haq's view, Zughoul and Taminian (2009) found that "Jordanian EFL students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English." Both the teaching and learning of writing in English are challenging since they involve a comprehensive knowledge of grammar, suitable vocabulary, writing mechanics (e.g. punctuation and capitalisation), organisational skills, style, imagination, and so on. Consequently, writing in English has historically been de-emphasised compared to other language skills (Javid & Umer, 2014). In another Arab country, Al-Khulaidi and Abdulkhalek (2022) touched on writing problems in Yemen, highlighting that writing education needs timely interventions.

Students face difficulties in writing appropriate topic sentences as well as concluding sentences, supporting details with examples and reasons, and using discourse markers appropriately. Rass (2015) found them unable to (1) provide supporting details as the skills for including examples and reasons are not fully mastered; (2) acquire the stylistic presentation when writing in English completely, as some students continue transferring the style of Arabic writing; and (3) develop a cohesive paragraph using the right coordinators and transition words. "L2 writers are known to face problems in developing their writing skills at the university level." (Javid & Umer, 2014) The weakness of English language learners, in general, has been attributed to various factors such as lack of knowledge on the part of school graduates when they join university, school and English language department curricula, teaching methodology, lack of the target language environment, and the learners' motivation (Khan, 2011).

However, learning a second language involves more than merely learning words and their associated sounds. Communication breakdowns occur not only due to the more commonly understood syntax and pronunciation difficulties but also because in learning a language, one also necessarily learns a culture (Khan, 2011). The difference in reading pattern is that in Arabic, one starts counting from the right while, in English, reading or counting starts from the left, so the 'teens' and 'tens' of English tend to get reversed in their usage by native Arabic speakers (Khan, 2011).

Addressing Linguistic and Cultural Challenges in Arab Countries

The current study draws on previous studies of difficulties learning English in Arab countries from the 1980s until the present. Given the many changes that have taken place in the teaching methods and communication landscape and learning, it is suggested that educators use literature to enhance EFL learning and teaching. Drama appears eminently fit for this purpose. The drama-oriented verbal and non-verbal exercises encourage the learner to speak spontaneously, think in a more complex way, and use body language since these exercises offer language in a meaningful context and comprise vocal, physical, and cultural aspects, as well as intellectual components of communicative competence. Finally, it combines verbal and non-verbal elements by correlating speech with actions as well (Uysal & Yavuz, 2018).

Oyama (2022) argues that "[l]iterary texts consist of language, and the primary concern of literary studies is how language in literature works." (p. 177) A language also embodies the ethos and cultural elements that push one to teach or learn the language in the social milieu which can be done through plays: improvisational plays, for example, encourage learners to engage in conversation (Bräuer, 2002). Drama can be defined as the activities in which students portray themselves or act out as another person in an imaginary scenario (Hişmanoğlu, 2005); it enables learners to express their ideas and emotions through gestures, body movements, and facial expressions, gives learners a purpose to interact in the play's language, and provides them an imaginary scene in which they are free to act and impersonate by experimenting a wider range of language rather than repeatedly drilling decontextualised language patterns. Play acting includes "a wide range of oral activities that have an element of creativity present." (Hubbard, 1986, p. 317) As Langer (1957) puts it, "[i]magination is the primary talent of the human mind, the activity in whose service language has evolved" (p. 57); drama provides a more holistic view of foreign language learning and thereby boosts communicative competence and emotional and social growth (Uysal & Yavuz, 2018).

In summary, adopting Western plays in EFL programs requires a balanced approach that appreciates cultural diversity, acknowledges linguistic challenges, and fosters a love for dramatic literature. Drama can be used to reflect on specific historical periods, social issues, and philosophical debates. Some Western plays address sensitive topics (e.g., violence, sexuality, religion), and these themes may be useful to be taught through drama, at the same time, respecting learners' values and beliefs and understanding the cultural differences between Western and Arab societies. Based on Oyama's postulation (2022), these plays can be introduced to learners in numerous different formats.

Conclusion

This study revisited the difficulties of learning English in Arab context, providing an account of the difficulties, and suggesting the teaching of English through literature with an emphasis on dramatic works. In the context of EFL, introducing Western plays to Arab learners presents opportunities as well as challenges. The main takeaway of the study is that teaching EFL through drama has the potential to elevate students' cognitive growth and develop their critical thinking, oral and written skills. The study, through analysis of existing research, enriches our understanding of the possibilities of improving English language learning in the Arab context world by selecting English plays appropriate for Arab socio-cultural scenarios. The study emphasizes the fact that using drama to teach English helps learners express their ideas and emotions through gestures and facial expressions as well as language. Plays can help learners feel uninhibited to act out and impersonate an imaginary scene by experimenting with a wider range of language, rather than repeated drilling of decontextualised language patterns. Learners also participate in a wide range of oral activities containing an element of creativity. For these reasons, among others, teachers of English should consider utilising drama in EFL contexts where exposure to the target language is limited.

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