



# Barely Literate Arabic Speaking Adults as Indicator of English Popularity

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## ABSTRACT

This exploratory article is intended to be a pre-pilot study that characterizes the perceived situation of the illiterate and barely literate Arabic speaking adults off-handedly learning some English literacy. The article considers this category of EFL learners as a tangible indicator of how English has assimilated in the public life; more or less than in the academic level. In this sense, the article addresses the base or the street level rather than the conventional top-to-bottom approach of most of the EFL literature of this region of the world. The initial situation evidence is the presence of this category of EFL learners as indicator of English popularity. The approach this article proposes is Structured Observation method where the presumed researchers use an observation form for collecting the basic English literacy the participants might have gained. The participants are typically assumed to be a sample of over 40 years old Arabic speaking adults with prior history of English schooling. The article concludes with a pre-pilot draft that can developed it into a full study.

**Keywords:** English as an Additional Language – Illiterate adults – Arabic speakers – Popularity.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

Unpopular is the description many Arab researchers - such as Al-Mahrooqi & Denman; 2018, opt for characterizing the status of English language among the multi Arab societies and their population of Arabic speakers. Why not, and English hasn't assimilate well in the public life of these societies so far, except limitedly in UAE out of the 22 countries of the Arab world. The reasons why not, are several that range between cultural, to religious to academic. No matter what the reasons behind alienating English language maybe, the daily life in this region of the world is still lagging behind. In contrast, in some other EFL societies English is so commonly used that the L1 speaker would raise a brow if a fellow citizens throws a sentence or two in English. Meaning there is an array of variances between these two statuses of familiarity and alienation of English as an Additional Language (EAL).

### Problem statement

By the time the literature dedicated to the Arabic speaking EFL focuses on the formal schooling and levels of proficiency, the population of the illiterate and barely literate Arabic speaking adults, is no less significant. This category of EFL learners is especially significant for both literary and sociolinguistic reasons. First, the category is totally overlooked in the abundant EFL literature despite its presence and it needs to be sized up and framed with a scholarly approach. Secondly, an ideal English assimilation is by its prevalence

through the base, rather than on the level of the elites. Meaning, every L1 population necessarily has a parentage of IELTS, TOEFL and other ELT certificates' holders. Additionally, every EFL country without exception adopts English in its higher education –including the Arabs, and graduating degree holders in the different majors and disciplines. However, the question is whether English has any presence outside the campuses. Generally speaking, the Arabs who attended school as early as 1970s and 1970s, are not expected to enjoy some English. That time around English was not taught in school.

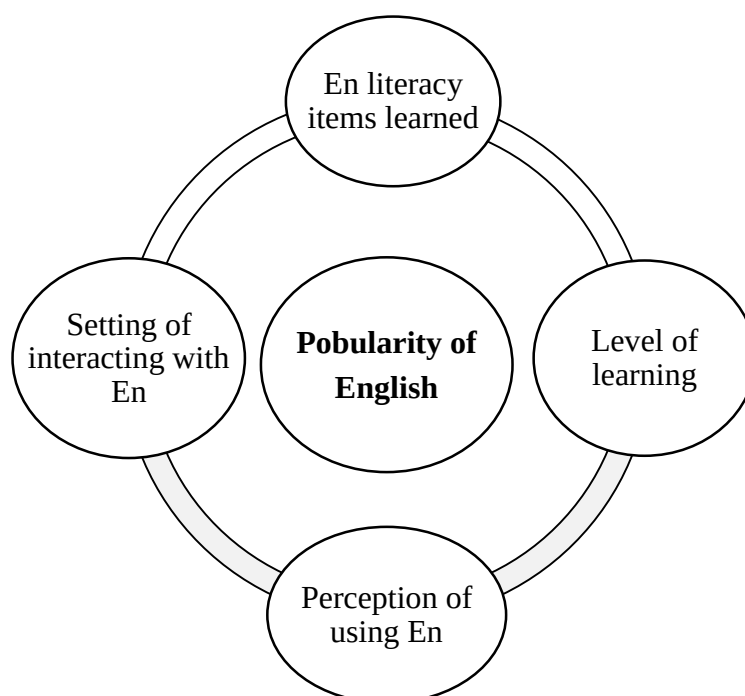
### Objective of the article

Characterizing the overlooked population of the illiterate and barely literate Arabic speaking adults who're off-handedly learning English literacy, is the first step towards framing this category of EAL learners. The objective of this initial characterization is to frame this category of EAL learners ready for a pilot study and maybe a full insight one. Hence, the objective entails devising potential premises of investigation, spotting the underlying literature gaps and finally drafting the appropriate method of research.

### METHOD

As an exploratory pre-pilot study article; much of an open discussion, it attempts to characterize, and roughly frame the case in hand. Hence, a thorough literature review is conducted and the obtained findings are used in establishing the key premises of the discussion. The set premises are so devised that the independent variable (IV) is the popularity of English and the dependent variables (IVs) are as shown in the chart below:

The DV and IVs Variables



The sampling on the other hand, is rather left for future researchers who may wish to develop this exploratory article into a full study. Meanwhile, the article takes the Arab world's population of over 400 million citizens of 22 countries as the subject. On this regard, in none of the Arab world's populations is English is a popular day-to-day language of communication as concluded by studies including that by Abdelgadir & Ramana; 2017. In addition several studies including that by Fareh, 2010) reported the variance between the level of EFL proficiency and the popularity of English among the Arab societies. This variance between can be contrasted AS displayed in Table (1) below:

Table 1. Proficiency vs. Popularity

| By EFL Proficiency | By Popularity of Use |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| ① Tunisia          | ① UAE                |
| ② UAE              | ② Eritrea            |
| ③ Lebanon          | ③ Kuwait             |
| ⑤ Egypt            | ④ Iraq               |
| ④ Oman             | ⑤ Egypt              |

The participants on the other hand, constitute the slim fraction of Arab adults who are expected be aging above 40 years. This assumption is based on a report by 2010 DDV International Org; 2018, that literacy in the Arab societies recorded as high as 95% by 2010. The report attributes the remaining 5% percentage of illiteracy to the presence of rural areas in the politically unstable Arab societies such as in Somalia and Yemen.

The instrument suggested for collecting the data for the will-be full study is an observation sheet where the potential researcher conducts sessions of inquiry with the potential participants. The suggested observation sheet maybe in Table (2) form blew:

Table 2. Modeled Observation Sheet

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                     |                                                               |                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Demographics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                     |                                                               |                                   |
| <b>Age:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> 40-50      | <input type="checkbox"/> 51-60                                | <input type="checkbox"/> 66-above |
| <b>Gender:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Male       | <input type="checkbox"/> Female                               |                                   |
| <b>Education:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Illiterate | <input type="checkbox"/> Elementary School graduate/ drop-out |                                   |
| <b>Setting (examples)</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>Literacy Items</b>               | <b>Learning Assessment</b>                                    |                                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phone (keyboard, texting)</li> <li>• Sign boards</li> <li>• Product packages info</li> <li>• Answer machines</li> <li>• Filling out forms (bio-data)</li> <li>• Social media activities</li> </ul> | Alphabets                           | Total                                                         | Notes                             |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Numbers                             | -----                                                         | -----                             |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Vocabulary                          | -----                                                         | -----                             |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Phrases & sentences                 | -----                                                         | -----                             |

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A lot of literature is dedicated to the unsatisfactory status of English language in the Arab world, of which is the major study by Faek & Lynch; 2014, that points out the root cause of the issue to be the cultural prejudice to Arabic language. The study attributes the “resistance” to English primarily to the political orientation during the 1955-1970 post-colonial era. That time the pan-Arab sentiments awakened by the spree of independence from the British colony ruled the Arab societies including the abandonment of the foreign language. Data extracted from several articles and reports including CEFR, ELT and DVV on the dates English language was introduced in the different Arab countries can chronologically be tabulated in Table (3) below:

Table 3. The Top Earliest Arab Countries to Introduce English in Schools

| Country   | Year | Note                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ① Lebanon | 1990 | ● The Francophone North African Arabs shifted from French as the EAL to English, which makes English less alien to their populations. |
| ② Sudan   | 1998 |                                                                                                                                       |
| ③ Oman    | 1999 |                                                                                                                                       |
| ④ Tunisia | 2000 | ● In Sudan, Kuwait and Oman English had been taught as the EAL before it was replaced by Arabic, then reintroduced recently.          |
| ⑤ Egypt   | 2003 |                                                                                                                                       |
| ⑥ UAE     | 2007 |                                                                                                                                       |
| ⑦ Algeria | 2022 |                                                                                                                                       |

The exception to that post-colonial revolt against English is pointed by Gregg (1990) that, in most cases English remained a vital medium of technical training, and limitedly, in the administrative levels in some Arab countries. On this regard, Al-Mahrooqi & Denman (2018) attribute Saudi Arabia's first exposure to English to the advent of Aramco Company as early as the 1950s and 1960s. This explains why until today the octogenarian former Aramco employees still maintain a decent command of English. The same situation is replicated in Sudan where the 1960s graduates of Bakht Al-Ridha Teaching College founded by the Britons back in 1934, had catered for English education until the 1970s (Samir, Ali & Alreaisy, 2020). Globally though, there were factors that contributed to the persistence of English language at the national level.

Globally speaking, the status of English as an additional language (EAL) in different countries is affected by several factors that resulted in variant realities. According to Sharqāwī & et al (2010) in the countries where the British –and later the Americans, had longer presence the influence lingered longer. Countries such as those later formed the Common Wealth League including India, Kenya and Sri Lanka assimilated English more than others. Whereas, the former US colonies such as the Philippines, the Dominican Republic and Thailand even though they were occupied later than the British ones, are still Anglophone even though with a less degree. According to Tahaine (2014) the degree of how English remained the prevalent EAL for these L1 societies was as well affected by some social and political factors. With regard to the fate of L1 in the face of English language according to Choi & Lee (2016), in most cases the first language reserved its significance and some cases in a creolized or in the jogging exchanges. The situation of the Arab countries on this regard seems to differ, if we consider the argument of the article by Azaz (2020). The article addresses the voices that advocate re-Arabicizing higher education; distancing the popularity of English even further. A key justification given for the radical stance is that English just doesn't availing the Arab societies neither socially nor academically. In fact the author of this article has already dedicated and published a paper on this last point of argument.

## DISCUSSION

Discussing the validity and the viability of the proposal of this article draws the discussion to the above stated premises and method that will finally substantiate the will-be pilot study. First, distinguishing between the two connotations of the very term English as a Second Language (ESL) is pivotal to the argument here. What is of interest here isn't the mainly academic implication as defined by Oxford Dictionary; 2010, to mean, "The teaching of English to people whose native language is not English". It is rather the "technical" term referring to the official adoption of English language in an L1 population that is synonymously referred to as English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The emphasis is on the word "official" here with its broader sense of denoting the state level or national orientation. Hence, a more convenient term to use in this discussion is the term English as an Additional Language (EAL) rather than the term ESL or the limitedly pedagogical one English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Now, in the global contexts, nations adopt English as an Additional Language (EAL) by variant levels. From the findings of reviewed literature, the popularity of English in a given L1 population can range between, fully EAL, partially EAL and barely EAL degrees as tabulated in Table (4) below:

Table 4. Leveling English Popularity

| L1 Population | Level of English Popularity |            |             | Instance                    |
|---------------|-----------------------------|------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
|               | Official                    | Academia   | Public life |                             |
| Fully EAL     | 5 out of 5                  | 5 out of 5 | 3 out of 5  | Philippines, Zambia, Gianna |
| Partially EAL | 2 out of 5                  | 4 out of 5 | 2 out of 5  | Kenya, Singapore, Portico   |
| Barely EAL    | 1 out of 5                  | 2 out of 5 | 1 out of 5  | Arab population, China,     |

Based on the above categorization of EAL populations, the Arab societies well fit in the Barely EAL category. The Barely EAL category of Table (3) Leveling English Popularity that is scaled as 1 out of 5, may actually scale Even though it is a common knowledge and a situational evidence for the authors of this article to claim, the Arab world's EFL literature replete with studies on the deficiencies in the triplet EAL levels [official, academia, public life]. The unpopularity use of English language in the daily life among the Arab societies is a topic in major studies such as that by Al-Mahrooqi & Denman (2018). One exception is pointed at by Lataille (2016) to be the 6 states region of the Gulf where the presence of the masses of expatriates relatively popularized English. The paradigm to look closer into here is the UAE where appears in both columns of Table 1. Proficiency vs. Popularity. The UAE here is a typical example since the percentage of the foreigners to UAE citizens is 88% to 12% respectively (Samir, Ali & Alreaisy, 2020). With this highly population of foreigners, it is obvious for English to be a vital language of communication in the UAE society including the slice of the less educated persons. Vice versa, the Arab societies that were not included in this list of top 5, would show none (zero) popularity; some of them at least. In such low EAL Arab societies such as Yemen, an average person may not encounter any form of English communication in his/her the day-to-day life.

Technology on the hand, has contributed to the popularity of English language among the Arab societies as well, even wider than the effect of the expatriates of the Gulf region. In fact the effect of technology on EFL learning and teaching is as well recurring topic in the studies of the Arab world's EFL literature. The study by Balla & Abdulla (2017) for instance concludes that Social Media in particular has promoted a whole set of English terms among Arabic speakers, a lot of which are popular as they and have undergone translation. While Azaz (2020) points out to the fact that many Arabic speakers who haven't had English schooling now deal with the English (Roman) alphabets including clusters like -sh, -wh, -ph; as well as widely familiar with the block and small forms of the letters. These findings about the thorough effect of technology and the limited Gulf expatriates on the popularity of English among the Arab societies, therefore, justify the design on a gauging instrument such as Table (2) Modeled Observation Sheet. Besides the suggested settings how the illiterate and barely literate adult Arabs might be interacting with English, the researchers can come up with more. For instance, these adults commonly encounter mixed Arabic-English messages when the use Auto Answer Machines in variant situations such as when they dial inquiry or support service numbers and in using ATM machines.

## CONCLUSION

This article concludes with putting the validity and worthiness of this pre-pilot draft on the hand of researchers to consider developing it into a study. The article attempted to characterize the situation of the population of the illiterate and barely literate Arabic speaking adults off-handedly learning some English literacy. As it does, the article addresses English basic literacy rather than proficiency and off-handedly rather than deliberately EFL learning. It assumes that otherwise the contemporary generations wouldn't realize whether or not English has assimilated in the base, i.e., the public life of the different Arab societies. Accordingly, the article has outlined the premises, method and variables the will-be pilot study is expected to build on.

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