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# Arabic Loanwords in English: The Neglected Asset of Arab EFL Learners

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**ABSTRAC**:

The purpose of this study was to determine whether giving instructions to Arab EFL learners on Arabic loanwords in English would help them better translate and guess the meaning of these words. Sixty freshman students were randomly divided into two groups, control and experimental. The t-test results indicated that students who were told about Arabic loanwords in English did significantly better on the vocabulary translation test than those who were not told so. Suggestions on how to teach Arabic loanwords to Arab EFL learners were stated at the end of this paper

**Introduction**

Kemmer (2004:1) states, "Loanwords are words adopted by the speakers of one language from a different language (the source language). A loanword can also be called a borrowing. …Borrowing is a consequence of cultural contact between two language communities".

As a matter of fact, English includes a lot of words from an Arabic origin which are supposed to be a real asset to Arab EFL learners. However, this asset is highly neglected, and what Arab EFL learners have is not sufficient for functional language proficiency. This lack of vocabulary repertoire is evident in learners' performance in EFL classes as reading comprehension, expressing meaning orally or on paper, and listening with understanding are all dependent on word knowledge.

Actually, there are many articles available to readers on Arabic loanwords in English; however, it seems there is hardly any one on the relevance of such words to teaching English to Arab EFL learners or to preparing teaching materials to such learners. A long time ago, Charles Fries stated his well-known theory of contrastive analysis based on similarities and differences between the mother tongue and the target language. Literally, Fries (1945:9) states" the most efficient [teaching] materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner". As for vocabulary items, Lado (1957) assumes that through this comparison, some words will be easy to the learners because they resemble native-language words, while others will be difficult because they differ from the native language. Accordingly, Arabic loanwords in English are supposed to be easy to our EFL learners in a way that they can be acquired very fast and contribute a lot in the development of EFL learners' vocabulary repertoire. However, this "easiness" may not take place because of the following three reasons (hypotheses):

1.  As EFL learners are not familiar with the fact that English includes a lot of words from Arabic origin, they, in most cases, will discover or guess the meaning of a loanword only if their EFL instructors tell them that a certain word is an Arabic loanword.
1.  2,  Arab EFL school instructors in Gaza are unfamiliar with a lot of Arabic loanwords in English, which is reflected on their learners' weak vocabulary repertoire.
2.  The EFL teaching materials in Gaza Schools include only a few of these words, and therefore, not many of such words are used in class.

Before investigating the credibility of the statements above, the present researcher would like to shed some light on the history of Arabic loan words in English and then on the benefits of these words in developing learners' vocabulary acquisition.

## Historical background

Arabic had ousted Latin in North Africa by the eighth century (Wilson, 2001), and the spread of Arabic through Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries influenced medieval Europeans, most notably in mathematics and astronomy (Metlitzki, 1977). As Arabic ranks the sixth language in the world, with an estimated 200 million native speakers, it deeply influenced many languages throughout the centuries such as Turkish, Urdu, Malay, Swahili, French, Spanish, and English. Speakers of these languages adopted an enormous number of Arabic loanwords and expressions in many different fields such as medicine, science, mathematics, astronomy, and literature. Loanwords from Arabic entered European languages through language contact. Millward (1996:202) states, "As Europe increased its knowledge through the Crusades and the spread of Islam, many Arabic and Persian words were borrowed into European languages". In fact, both Middle and Modern English were directly and indirectly influenced by Arabic loanwords.

Most scholars believe that the process of borrowing from Arabic may have started in the eleventh and twelfth century, the period of Middle English, when the Arabic civilization had fully spread in Spain. In addition, Crusades and merchant trade brought Arabic and Western European cultures into close contact, and are considered the main source of indirect borrowing from Arabic. Middle English borrowed most of Arabic words through French since the latter was the language of the educated class in England. Therefore, many military terms loaned into Middle English are derived from French words that are borrowed from Arabic.  For instance as Canon (1994)

points out, *Barbican* comes into English through Old French *Barbicane* which is from Arabic *Barbakhanah* (a house or guard on the wall), and *Admiral* is borrowed from Old French *Amiral* which is from Arabic *Amir* meaning (a commander of). Furthermore, spices imported through Northern Italy such as, *Cumin* is from Greek *Kuminon*, which is from Arabic *Kammun*. *Saffron,* borrowed from Old French *Safran,* is also from Arabic *Za'faran*. The definite article "*al*", which means "the" in English, was preserved in the Middle English loan word *albatross* which *is* originally *al-ghattas* (the diver). Sometimes the article is elided and the "al" drops off, as in *Lute*, derived from Old French *Lut*, which is from Arabic *Al-ud*. In words such as *elixir*, the *al* in the Arabic word *al-iksir* is transformed into *el* and becomes part of the word's meaning.

Wilson (2001) and Canon, (1994) maintain that in the Medieval or Renaissance period, Chaucer was the first to use loanwords from Arabic, mainly through French. Chaucer, according to Metlitzki (1977), however, was deeply interested in medieval science and philosophy and used such words in his literary works, including Treatise *on the Astrolabe*, composed in 1391. Wilson (2001) states that Arabic loanwords first recorded in Chaucer's works include:

Almagest, almanac, almucantar, almury, Alnath, nadir. (Astronomy)
Alkali, azimuth, borax, tartar, and amalgam (as a verb). (Chemistry)
Satin, gipon. (Clothing)
Lancegay, jupon. (Military)
Fers, checkmate. (Games)
Damask, Sarsenish, fen, Arabic, ribibe, carrack, dulcarnon. (Miscellaneous)

Chaucer's use of both the interjection *checkmate* and the noun *fers* in his earlier poem, "The Book of the Duchess" tells us how popular the game was at that time. Etymologically, according to Serjeantson (1961), the interjection *checkmate* comes from the Arabic and Persian *shah mat*, meaning, (the king died), while the word *fers,* as the name for the queen chess piece, is derived ultimately from the Arabic word *firzan*, meaning (wise man or counselor). Chaucer's use of words like *fers* and *checkmate*, shows clearly the gradual emergence of Arabic influence, in both culture and language, within Medieval England and Middle English.

In the Early and Modern English period, the colonial expansion and trade brought the Arabic and European cultures closer to each other. This proximity maximized the process of borrowing in both directions, and more and more Arabic words entered into English. In terms of food, for instance,

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nowadays Arab visitors to England would realize that Britain would still be far behind had it not started its trade with the Muslims.

Semantically, a number of Arabic loans have undergone changes after borrowing. The word *hazard*, for instance, demonstrates the change across several different languages. From Arabic *az-zahr* "the dice", it developed the meaning of "unlucky throw of the dice" as Old Spanish *azar*, and this was transferred into Old French. In English from about the year 1300,

*hazard* was at first a specialist term in dice throwing, golf and billiards, but by 1618, it had developed an additional generalized meaning of "risk". Moreover, the word *Magazine,* from French *magasin*, from Arabic *al-maxzen* (storeroom), now has three related English meanings: a storehouse for arms, part of a gun that stores cartridges, and a print periodical (storehouse for information). (Zahoor and Haq, 1997).

Zahoor and Haq (1997) also mention some metaphorical change. For instance, *tabby* meant "silk cloth with striped pattern" when borrowed from French. *Tabis* "rich watered silk" came from Late Latin *attabi* from Arabic *at-taabi* "watered silk from Attab" (a place in Baghdad). By 1695, the phrase *tabby cat* was in use, and *tabby* as a noun meaning "striped cat" developed by 1774.

Proper nouns borrowed from the history or mythology of any country may develop new meanings according to cultural assumptions of the borrowing group. Zahoor and Haq (1997) mention interesting examples: *Genie* (as in *Aladdin's Lamp*) entered English as a fascinating spirit, very different from the demonic meaning of Arabic *jinn*.

| Original | Arabic Name | Meaning |
|----------|-------------|---------|
| Alhambra | al-Hamra | The Red |
| Almaden | al-Maydan | The Field |
| Alqazar | al-Qasr | The Palace |
| Alcantara | al-Qantarah | The Bridge |
| Almenara | al-Manarah | Minaret |
| Alborg | al-Burj | The Tower |
| Alcove | al-Qubbah | Dome |

In addition to the semantic
change, loanwords may undergo
a syntactic change. According to
Zahoor (1992**),** most of the names
starting with *Al-* , Ar-, Cala-, and Guad- are corrupted forms of Arabic names originally used to refer to  places, rivers, mountains and other places during the Muslim rule in Spain and Portugal. Then they were adopted in the Americas in the 1500s and later centuries.

Zahoor  (1992) also mentions the following sets of Latinized /English as Arabic loanwords which show clearly changes in form:

**Stars:**

| English Name | Arabic Name |
|---|---|
| Achernar | Akhir al-Nahr |
| Acrab | Aqrab (Scorpion) |
| Phurked | farqad (calf) |
| Altair | Nasr al-Tair |

**Mathematics:**

| English Name | Arabic Name |
|---|---|
| Algorism, Algorithm | Al-Khawariz-mi |
| Zenith | Cenit |
| Nadir | Nadir, Nazir |
| Atlas | Atlas |

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**Medical Terms:**

| English Name | Arabic Name |
|---|---|
| Alchemy | Al-kimiya |
| Antimonio, Antimony, Antimun | Antimun, Ithmid |
| Alcanfor, camphor | Kafur |

**Names in Chemistry and Other Frequently Used Words:**

| English Name | Arabic Name |
|---|---|
| Earth | Ardh, Earz |
| Alembic | Alembic |
| Adobe | Al-tub |
| Alkali | Alkali |
| Alum | Alum |
| Rice | Ruzz |

**Anatomical Terms:**

| English Name | Arabic Name |
|---|---|
| Aorta | Avarta |
| Pancreas | Bankrias |
| Colon | Colon |
| Basilie | Baslik |
| Epidemis | Aghadidus |
| Cephallie | Kifal |

hey associate these words with words in their native language.

It is well known that vocabulary acquisition is a very essential component of any L2 learning/teaching process. The question is, which words do early EFL learners n To conclude, the process of borrowing

from Arabic started as early as the beginning of 11<sup>th</sup> century. In the Middle English period, Arabic loanwords spread out indirectly in the whole Europe through trade merchants and Crusades. Consequently, in the Early and Modern English, Arabic vocabulary began to be used in most life fields as mentioned above, particularly in Astronomy and Mathematics.

Loanwords and Vocabulary Acquisition

As stated above, Arabic loanwords in English are supposed to benefit our EFL learners a lot in their English vocabulary acquisition. For instance, Daulton (1999) states that English loanwords in Japanese help Japanese EFL learners to build in lexicon in English. He adds that these words are, therefore, considered an asset to these learners in spite of some transformations that these words undergo when adopted into Japanese. He explains that even when there is radical semantic shifting, it is the exception and not the rule. Furthermore, Daulton quotes Brown and Williams (1985) stating that EFL learners will understand the word better if it is a loanword cognate, and that learners may do better when t eed in order to develop their vocabulary? Many scholars of language acquisition mentioned some criteria for selecting such vocabulary such as frequency of use, concrete words, easily received and produced words, etc. (Carter and McCarthy, 1995). In fact these criteria are very important in a way that they tell which words might be more needed by EFL learners, but may not tell which words are easier and faster in acquisition. Hence I argue in favor of selecting Arabic loan words to be among the would-be-needed vocabulary to be introduced to Arab EFL learners. These words will be easily acquired by EFL learners if they are told about their origin in order to make some associations between both L1 and L2. In this regard, Channell (1995) states that L2 learners make conscious links between L1 and L2 lexicons phonologically, semantically and associationally, and that learners should be encouraged in the classroom to make such association. In addition to Channell, Atkinson and Raugh (1975) argue for the advantages of associating L2 words with a native word. They add that word difficulties or easiness stems from some features including its relation to L1 which help memorization and retention.

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# Method

## Subjects

The participants in this study were 60 freshman students. The students, both males and females, are enrolled in the second semester, 2012 at the IUG English Department. The researcher selected the subjects randomly (using systematic sampling) from about 400 students, randomly divided them into two groups and randomly assigned one group to treatment. The students are from the Gaza Strip cities and refugee camps. Their age was almost the same (19 years old), and their socioeconomic background was similar (low to lower-middle class) since all of them were from a densely populated small area of over a million people, and all of them were suffering from the same socio-economic hardships. Generally, the participants' academic level was almost similar since all of them were admitted to the university according to a fixed graduate point average (GPA) in their general secondary certificates and studied the same courses.

In addition to the IUG English Department students, the researcher asked 30 secondary schoolteachers of English to participate in this study by responding to the teacher questionnaire. The teachers who hold a bachelor degree in English with 8 − 12 year teaching experience were selected randomly from hundreds of secondary school English teachers.

## The Independent Variable

The researcher used a non-pre-test randomized experimental-control group design. The independent variable consists of two conditions: (a) an experimental condition in which students received about one hour of instructions on Arabic loan words in English, by their instructor (the researcher) and (b) a control condition in which students did not receive any instructions.

The researcher believes that a pretest was not necessary since the two groups of students are homogeneous in their academic ability based on the results of the mid-term translation exam taken two weeks before the experiment, the subjects were randomly grouped and assigned to treatment, the period of time for the whole experiment and treatment was very short, and all of the subjects studied the same courses and were admitted to the English department according to the same standards.

## Setting

The Islamic University of Gaza (IUG), which is the context of this study, is located in Gaza City. It is an independent Palestinian institution

and supervised by the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education. It follows the credit hour system, where the academic year is divided into two sixteen-week semesters and an optional eight-week summer session. In the year 2010/2011, the IUG staff numbered 549 members, serving 18,799 students of which 410 male and female students specializing in English. To obtain a bachelor degree, students are required to complete 140 credit hours of coursework, including 37 credit hours as university requirements, 15 credit hours as school requirements, and 88 credit hours as major requirements. The major requirement includes courses in translation, linguistics, phonetics, literature, grammar, and the four skills (Islamic University of Gaza, 2011).

### Procedure

At the end of the second semester 2011/2012, the researcher selected randomly 60 male and female freshman students from the IUG English Department and divided them into two equal groups. He asked the first group (control group) to translate into Arabic a list of 30 words, of which 15 are Arabic loan words. In this session, the researcher did not tell the students anything about the origin of these 15 words. In the second group (experimental group), and after a few hours of instructions on Arabic loan words in English ( focusing on how such words undergone phonological, syntactic and semantic changes) , the researcher asked the students to translate into Arabic the same list of words given to the first group, but he told them that the list includes 15 Arabic loan words. In addition, the researcher distributed a teacher questionnaire (see appendix I) among 30 schoolteachers in Gaza City eliciting their response to questions related to their familiarity and use of Arabic loanwords in English, and whether they believe that these words are of any benefit to their learners.

### Results

To investigate the above hypotheses, the researcher first used Shapiro Wilk Test for normality assumption since the sample size for each group is less than 50. From SPSS output, sig. is equal to .165 and .099 for the control group and the experimental group respectively. Since the two sig. values are greater than the significance level $\alpha = .05$, then the null hypothesis of normality is not rejected. Therefore, the data for the two groups are normally distributed. The test of descriptive statistics shows clearly the big difference between the two means. They

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are 4.4667 and 9.3667 for the control group and the experimental group respectively.

| Group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Control group | 30 | 4.4667 | 2.12916 | .38873 |
| Experimental group | 30 | 9.3667 | 1.75152 | .31978 |

To see whether this difference is statistically significant, the researcher used the t-test since the assumption of normality is satisfied. From SPSS result, the equality of variances assumption is satisfied because from Levine's test for equality of variances, sig. = .151, so the assumption of equality of variances is not rejected.

**Independent Samples Test**

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference |
| score | Equal variances assumed | 2.115 | .151 | -9.735 | 58 | .000 | -4.90000 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | -9.735 | 55.921 | .000 | -4.90000 |

The value of the t-test = -9.735 and sig. = .000. This means that the null hypothesis which assumes insignificant difference between the mean scores for the two groups is rejected because sig. < .05. In conclusion, there is sufficient evidence to support the alternative hypothesis which assumes significant mean difference between the two means of the two groups. Since the sig. of the t-test is negative, the mean score for the control group is significantly smaller than that of the experimental group. In other words, the students who received some instructions on the loan words got higher points in their translation of the 30 words.

### The Teacher Questionnaire Results
In their questionnaire, teachers were asked to respond to the following for questions (see appendix 1):

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1.      Are you familiar with many Arabic loanwords in English?
        Yes    no
2.      If "yes", do you use them in your classroom?
        Yes    no
3.      Do you think the EFL teaching materials you are using contain
        Many Arabic loanwords
        Yes    no
4.      Do you think presenting and using these words in class will
        Develop and speed up your learners' acquisition of new
        Yes    no
         Vocabulary in English?

Following is the Chi Square products for these questions:

| Response | | Observed N $\chi^2$ | $p$ | Expected N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q.1 | Yes | 26 | | 15.0 |
| | No | 4 | | 15.0 |
| 16.133 | .000*** | | | |
| Q.2 | Yes | 13 | | 15.0 |
| | No | 17 | | 15.0 |
| .533 | .465 | | | |
| Q.3 | Yes | 17 | | 15.0 |
| | No | 13 | | 15.0 |
| .533 | 465 | | | |
| Q.4 | Yes | 26 | | 15.0 |
| | No | 4 | | 15.0 |
| 16.133 | .000*** | | | |

For question 1, the table shows that the difference between the observed frequencies of 'yes' and 'no' (column 2) and the frequencies that would be expected (column 3) is statistically significant because the Chi Square coefficient yields $p$ value of .000. So, in this case, $p < .05$. This means that the proportion of teachers who said 'yes' to the first question was much larger than the proportion of teachers who said 'no'. Accordingly,  the

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schoolteachers in Gaza schools are familiar with many Arabic loan words in English which is against the hypothesis presented above.

In question 2 and 3, sig. = .465 for both questions which is > .05. Therefore, there is insignificant difference between the proportion of teachers who said that they use Arabic loan words in class and that the teaching materials they are using are full of many of these words; and the proportion of those who said "no".

In question 4, the value of Chi Square = 16.133, and sig. = .000. Since sig. is < .05, then we conclude that there is a significant difference between the proportion of teachers who said "yes" and that who said "no". This means that schoolteachers in Gaza believe that Arabic loan words in English will develop students' vocabulary acquisition if these words are presented and used in class.

### Discussion

The t-test results indicate that the first hypothesis is confirmed, and that our EFL learners better guess and discover the meaning of loanwords if their instructors attract their attention to the idea of borrowing. In other words, EFL learners may not think of the idea of borrowing unless they are told to do so. This is very much expected since the whole topic of loanwords is  not common among learners nor their instructors. In addition, EFL learners, as mentioned before, may look at any Arabic loanword as a difficult one, especially if this word adopts some features of the borrowing language and therefore undergoes some changes.

The Chi Square result of the first question in the teacher questionnaire shows that most of our Gaza EFL schoolteachers are familiar with many Arabic loanwords. This means that the second hypothesis is not confirmed. The question now is that if this is the case, then their learners should be familiar with such words, too. Unfortunately, the t-test results do not show that clearly. It is possible that while these schoolteachers are familiar with such words, they may not "tell" their learners that these words are from an Arabic origin, taking for granted that their learners know that since these words are somehow similar to other Arabic forms. It should be mentioned that the topic of loanwords is not common  in the university courses nor in the school syllabi, and therefore, the idea of borrowing from another language is not mentioned or discussed in class. Therefore, teachers' familiarity with a lot of Arabic loanwords is possibly a self-learning enterprise. However, many schoolteachers might have understood or interpreted the word "many" in the first question differently. In addition, it is possible for a schoolteacher who knows a few loanwords to respond

positively to the first question because the answer "no" is very humiliating, especially when it is related to the major and academic proficiency of our Gaza schoolteachers who are very proud of themselves as teachers of English, this internationally well-known and highly-respected language.

The third hypothesis was also disconfirmed based on the results of questions two and three in the teacher questionnaire. In other words, teachers use Arabic loanwords in class and the teaching materials they are using contain many of these words. In fact, the present researcher did make a quick review to the secondary school English syllabi in Gaza. However, the number of these words in these syllabi is very limited and the most frequent ones are the most common ones such as cat, sugar, cotton, coffee, etc, which every school pupil is familiar with. This is why, perhaps, there is not a big difference between the number of teachers who said "yes" and that who said "no". Again, it is "telling" the learners that a particular word is an Arabic loanword that makes a difference in students' performance but not the number of such words used in class or in the teaching materials. Therefore, the present researcher does not find these findings in contradiction with the results of the t-test above.

Finally, the vast majority of our EFL schoolteachers believe that presenting Arabic loanwords in class will help our learners develop their vocabulary repertoire. Presenting such words and talking about them and their origin will help learners make conscious links or associations between these words and similar ones in their L1. This result, in addition to that of the t-test, entails us, as EFL instructors, to think seriously of how to make the best use of this "asset" (Arabic loanwords in English) in our classrooms in order to develop our EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition.

**Summary and Suggestions**

Being the first of its type, with a limited sample from a small population in a restricted geographical area, more research is needed on Arabic loanwords in English and their benefit in developing EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition in order to confirm the results revealed in this paper. According to these results, Arab EFL learners will benefit a lot from the too many Arabic loanwords found in English provided that these learners are instructed about these words. Results show that the Arab EFL learners who are told about the origin of Arabic loanwords guess and translate these words much better than those learners who are not told about the origin of such words. This is very much expected; however, it is important that schoolteachers are reminded to remind their students of such words.

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The researcher believes that the big number of Arabic loan words in English is a real asset to Arab EFL learners, but it is totally neglected by Arab EFL instructors and educators. It is not necessarily to be an integral part of school syllabi. A big number of Arabic loan words in English can be compiled by schoolteachers and presented to students as additional or complementary teaching materials. When teaching new words, most scholars support using a balanced approach between the incidental (indirect) approach and the intentional (direct) approach though both overlap. In class, therefore, Arab EFL instructors are encouraged to expose their learners to authentic L2 materials with highlighted loanwords, and train them to contextually deduce the meaning of these words and make correct links with the corresponding Arabic words. At home, Arab EFL learners should be exposed to easy and pleasurable extensive reading materials which are full of frequently used loanwords. In addition, they may list some of them in a column and list in front of them their Arabic equivalents in another column and encourage their learners to memorize a few words a day and then use them in meaningful sentences. Finally, it is important to have learners keep vocabulary logs of all Arabic loanwords as part of their learning journals. However, what is more important than all this is "telling" these learners that these words are from Arabic origin and that they may still keep their phonological, semantic or syntactic forms.

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