

An easy way to pronounce the consonants in Arabic

1. Introduction

Many people learn the sounds of other languages by listening and copying what they here. This is called mimicking, and if you can do it, that is great. The problem is that many people are poor copiers of the sounds and accents of others. They need some help. They need careful teaching on how to say the new sounds. And that is what I intend to teach you now.

I am teaching you as someone who has struggled to learn languages. I do not find language learning easy. I always need explanations. Very few of my teachers have given me this in the past. I want you to get a head start on Arabic pronunciation by learning how to say the sounds. And even if you have already learned to speak reasonably, this knowledge may help you to help someone else.

Now what I am going to explain, and you are going to practice, is in fact not very difficult. In fact, I think every language teacher should be able to explain the sounds of the language they are teaching in the way I am going to do with Arabic! I think it is so easy to do that even school children can be taught this way. **I am going to adopt the following principles:**

- a. Careful description of each sound in Arabic that is new or different to a similar sound in English.
- b. Systematic comparison of Arabic with English, so that when an Arabic sound can be made by making a minor change in an English sound, it will be described this way. I will also draw on the huge variety that exists within English. Sometimes a new sound in Arabic actually exists somewhere, or is very similar to something in English. I will demonstrate later.
- c. Where I can, and where my audience can benefit, I will also refer to critical differences in other languages such as French and Spanish.
- d. I will use current linguistic knowledge, but use simpler terminology where I can. I will also provide the linguistic terminology in the documentation that goes with this lecture.
- e. I will teach you the basics. I will provide you with some of the knowhow, and it will be up to you and the arab helpers to finetune you.

Let me begin with a funny story. It is a true story. In 1985 I was in a language class for Classical Arabic. The teacher, rightly, stressed the importance of good pronunciation from the beginning. Now as I will explain below, there are two different forms of H in Arabic, sometimes called a strong, emphatic form and a weak form. The strong form is a particular problem. Few in the class could say it. The teacher tried to tell us that it was because we were not putting enough effort into the pronunciation. We needed to fill our lungs and push out hard.

ha, Ha, Ha

We tried. It was comical, and completely failed. You will see why later.

2. Vowels in Arabic

Vowels are rarely a problem for learners of Arabic but some observations will be useful. The traditional explanation is that Arabic has six vowels, three short: /u/, /a/ and /i/ and three long, /u:/ or /uu/, /a:/ or /aa/, and /i:/ or /ii/. When writing Arabic phonetically there are two customs for indicating a long vowel. The linguists use a colon /a:/ but many ordinary people simply write the letter twice /aa/. It does not matter. Arabic also has diphthongs such as /iu/ and /ia/, but these are not a problem so the point is not important.

English has at least 20 vowels (if you include the double vowels - the diphthongs). This means that one vowel sound in Arabic has a considerable range of variation, and can include several sounds which are quite distinct in English. What it means here is that the English ear is well trained in distinguishing the sounds of vowels. Later we will make use of this skill. It can be used to help distinguish consonants that sound very similar to English ears.

The focus of attention in Arabic is consonants. And just as vowels can be short or long, consonants can be short or long. I will deal with this when I consider the individual sounds.

3. Some theory of consonants

There are three distinctive features of most consonants that need to be mentioned. All consonants have to have these three components.

- a. The place in the mouth where the sound is made. Linguists say ‘the place of articulation’. This place varies from the lips at the front right down to the voice box itself.
- b. The way the sound is made, linguists call this the ‘manner of articulation’. The most common ways are some kind of explosion, or plosive, such as /p/ /t/ /k/ and /g/, or something resulting from friction, the fricatives, such as /f/ /sh/ /x/ and /h/
- c. Whether or not the sound is voiced or voiceless. The easiest way to explain this is to take the sounds /p/ and /b/. Before you try them out, put your hand over your Adam’s apple, your voice box. When the vocal cords inside this box vibrate they produce sound. Only some consonants include vibration from the vocal cords. These are called voiced consonants. Try these sounds, /p/ and /b/ now. Which one of them includes some vibration?

I hope you will agree that /b/ is voiced. The distinction is very important as you will see later.

- d. There are four consonants in Arabic which also has an extra feature called Secondary Articulation. I will deal with this later.

4. Consonants in general

Can you please now look at tables 1 and 2 in your handouts.

Firstly, you will see that there is more than one system of phonetics in use. There is the international list, and many others. Once you have learned Arabic you will find all these different scripts far more confusing than the Arabic script. So I really want to encourage you to use the Arabic script as much as possible. I know that for some people it takes a long time to learn it. In fact, in the first year of learning Arabic I used phonetics almost entirely. I only switched into Arabic when I started courting and wanted to show my future wife I was serious about language learning! Some people are at ease in it in a few weeks. It took me two years. I say that not to discourage you but to encourage you to keep persevering.

Secondly, I want you to notice the names given to the consonants in Arabic. No one ever taught me these names. No one ever suggested I learn them. No one ever gave me a list, and I had to dig quite hard to find one in a textbook. And yet the list is very easy to learn, and very useful. In a few weeks time you will want to write down a new word, and you will want to ask for the spelling. Or you will want to ask which R it is. Well now you know, you can say “réé or rayn?” This is easy.

Thirdly, you do not need to pay any attention to the right hand column: linguistic description. I have included it for the sake of completeness, and because sometimes we get someone listening who half remembers their linguistics and they find it helpful. I also find it useful when people ask me questions!

Table 1. Arabic consonants which exist in English
 é sound as in *café*, a sound as in ‘ba ba black sheep’

	Arabic Script	International phonetic script	Symbol used in Hans Wehr Dictionary	Other phonetic scripts	Arabic name	Linguistic description
1.	ب	b	b		bé	voiced bilabial plosive
2.	ت	t	t		tée	voiceless alveolar plosive. Can be dental or postalveolar
3.	ث	θ	t̤	th	θée	voiceless dental fricative
4.	د	d	d		dal	voiced alveolar plosive. Can be dental or postalveolar
5.	ذ	ð	d̤	dh	dhaal	voiced dental fricative
6.	س	s	s		siin	voiceless alveolar fricative
7.	ش	ʃ	š	sh	shiin	voiceless postalveolar fricative
8.	ف	f	f		fée	voiceless labiodental fricative
9.	ك	k	k		kéeʃ	voiceless velar plosive
10.	ل	l	l		léém	alveolar lateral approximant. Voiced velar lateral approximant exists, sometimes called the ‘dark el’
11.	م	m	m		miim	voiced nasal bilabial
12.	ن	n	n		noon	voiced alveolar nasal
13.	ه	h	h		hée	voiceless glottal fricative
14.	و	w	w		waaw	voiced labial-velar approximant. A special case: can function as a consonant or a vowel
15.	ي	j	y	y	yée	voiced palatal approximant. A special case: can function as a consonant or a vowel
16.	ز	z	z		zée	voiced alveolar fricative

Table 2. New Arabic Consonants
é sound as in café, a sound as in ‘ba ba black sheep’

	Arabic Script	International phonetic script	Symbol used in Hans Wehr Dictionary	Other phonetic scripts	Arabic name	Linguistic description
17.	ج	ʒ	j	j	jiim	postalveolar voiced fricative
18.	ر	r	r	r	ra	voiced alveolar trill
19.	غ	R	ḡ	gh, R	rayn	voiced uvular trill
20.	ح	ħ	ḥ	H	ha	voiceless pharyngeal fricative
21.	ع	ʕ	‘	ʕ, ʁ, ε	ʕayn or ʕayn	voiced pharyngeal fricative
22.	خ	x	ḵ	kh, x	xaa	voiceless velar fricative
23.	ق	q	q	k	qaaf	voiceless uvular plosive
24.	هـ و أ ئ	ʔ	’	‘	Hamza, supported by alif, waaw, or ya	voiceless glottal plosive. glottal stop. Notice the easy confusion in Wehr between ʕayn and hamza,
25.	ص	sʷ	ṣ	S	SaaD	velarised, voiceless alveolar fricative. velarised eS. the back S
26.	ط	tʷ	ṭ	T	Tah	velarised, voiceless dental plosive. velarised téé. back T.
27.	ض	dʷ	ḍ	D	Daa	velarised, voiced dental plosive. velarised Déé. back D.
28.	ظ	ðʷ	ẓ	DH	DHah	velarised, voiced dental fricative. velarised dhée. back DH.

Hans Wehr. **A dictionary of modern written Arabic (Arabic-English)**. 4th edition, Wiesbaden 1979. This is the standard Arabic English dictionary. It is organised by roots, then derivatives.

5. Consonants which are the same in English and French

Look now at Table 1: consonants which are the same in English and Arabic. There should be no problems. French people might have problems with /sh/ and /h/. I can help you individually if you need it later.

6. Sound number 17, /j/ jiim

Remember that English has two sounds for /j/. The usual sound, as in 'judge' is in fact /dj/. In Arabic, the sound is almost always /j/ as in 'measure'.

7. Sounds 18 and 19, /r/ and /R/, ra (written gh in French) and rayn

Arabic has two r's. A front r and a back R. Some people have problems saying the front r. What you have to do is to curl your tongue, narrow your lips, and let your tongue tip waggle anywhere above your teeth. Some people do it right near the teeth, some further back. It does not matter. If you have ever been to Marseille, the French there use this front r.

The back R is rather different. It is similar to the Parisian R. For this one you do the opposite. You push your tongue back in your mouth and try to waggle your tonsils.

I find it very difficult to hear the difference between these two sounds. Maybe you find it hard too. There may be a way though that will help you. Listen for the vowels that go with /r/ and the vowels that go with /R/. Another way is to collect pairs of words which are identical except for one letter which changes - even if these words do not actually exist in Arabic. Get your language helper to record them, and you listen to them until you can hear the difference.

raabata - Raabata, ruubata- Ruubata, riibata Riibata.

Then try it with words in which the problem letter is in the centre, and finally, try it with words in which the problem letter is at the end.

8. Sound 20, Ha

Remember how I said that in 1985 a teacher tried to get us to say ha, Ha, Ha ! Of course we failed. A better way is to imagine you are being strangled. Better still, pretend to strangle yourself as you are breathing out. Whispers only! Heeelp! Now put your fingers on your voice box as you do this. You should feel friction as you say this sound.

The sound is made when the throat muscles contract. Now many of you have discovered muscles you never knew you had. It takes a lot of practice to train these muscles, to strengthen them, and to control them. But the sound does not come by using a lot of effort from the stomach.

I am now going to introduce a short-cut to this sound. This short-cut is based on what linguists call allophony, or allophones. You will not find this in the textbooks. Basically, it means that if you cannot say exactly the right sound, you can often get away with it, and not be noticed, if you say a sound which is really close.

In English we have this all the time. We have the English r, some use the front r, and other dialects use the back r. In English, for comprehension it really does not matter.

You have noticed already that your throat muscles easily get tired. So why use them? On the other hand, most of us have had years of practice at using our tongue. I have never heard anyone complain that their tongue was tired! So the trick is this: push your tongue as far back in your mouth as you can, and breathe out . hotel - Hotel, hot-Hot, hut-Hut, hit-Hit.

That is a good beginning: you know how to say this sound. In the next few months and years many of you will get it right sometimes, but not always. You will pronounce some words correctly, and not others. Now these faults can be a real challenge to diagnose and then take corrective action. But one of the major reasons why people sometimes hit a sound, and sometimes do not, is the **position in the word**.

Now as you probably know, most consonants in Arabic can be found in all three major positions in a word:

at the beginning: Haliib, Habiib.

in the middle: nHib

and at the end, elbééraH

File this for the future. Listen to yourself as you speak. Get someone to listen to you specifically to notice in what contexts Ha is a problem, and in what contexts it is not. See if the hypothesis is valid, that there are problems in certain positions in words.

Then for practice, get your language helper to write down lots of phrases with the problem words in, and drill them endlessly.

My last point under Ha is that sometimes in dialect there is a change in word pattern. In classical it is 'Haliib'. Now it is very difficult to say 'Ha' at the beginning of a word. So what happens is that you often hear 'aHliib'. aH is much easier to say at the beginning of a word than Ha. One teacher taught me Haliib. The Peace Corps dictionary has Hliib which is very difficult to say. It was only later this was corrected by others as aHliib, which is much easier and more natural to say. A side note to linguists: you will recognise this phenomenon as one of adding a helper vowel before a problem sound. It exists in English learners. Generally, adding extra helper vowels like this never hinders pronunciation. Even if the helper vowel is wrong, you will be understood. It is when learners delete sounds they are likely to be misunderstood.

9. Sound 21, 3ayn

The confusion over this sound comes I think from the Arabic alphabet. It is nearly always put with rayn, so people think 3ayn and rayn are somehow similar. They are similar - in writing. But in speaking, the 3ayn goes with the Ha.

The 3ayn is a voiced Ha. If you say the Ha, and vibrate your vocal cords, you will end up saying an 3ayn. So, the same method for learning it applies. Pretend to strangle yourself. Only this time, do not whisper, shout out. 3ali! It is MoHammed 3ali, not Mohammed Ali.

The same tricks apply. Try pushing your tongue back. In fact, the effort of pushing your tongue back with time will also help you to tighten those throat muscles.

10. Sound 22, Xaa

This sound exists in Scottish, and other dialects of English. German speakers also have no problems with it. The English say Loch Lommond with a k in Loch. The Scots say ‘lox’. To find out how to say it, I want you to feel the upper jaw of your mouth. Run your tongue tip back from the front, near the teeth, until the surface turns a bit soft. That is where the sound is made. Now, flatten your tongue, then arch the middle of your tongue and move it backwards. The middle bend in your tongue must come near this soft bit. When you do you get friction.

Now, here is a problem word to say. What is the dialect for peach? xuux.

11. Sound 23, qaaf

You may have heard stories about this sound. What is the difference for instance between ‘kuul’ and ‘quul’? ‘kuul’ is the command to eat, and ‘quul’ is the command to speak.

Actually, most learners of Arabic quickly master this sound. They soon find they can hear it and say it correctly.

kééf is said at the level of the soft palate - as in xaa. qaaf though is said further back, at the level of your tonsils. Hold your mouth open, with relaxed rounded lips. The back of your tongue is arched, but below the tonsils. Now suddenly raise the arch of your tongue until it touches your tonsils, and at the same time breathe out (without voicing). Now try it:

kéél-qaal, kéém-qaam, kiim-qiim, kuum-quum.

I said at the beginning that English ears are more tuned in to vowels than to consonants. In fact, consonants and vowels do influence each other. So a front consonant is likely to go with a front vowel, and a back consonant will go with a back vowel. I tell you now that the /éé/ sound is said near the front of the mouth, hence the name for the front k: kéé.

12. Sound 24, hamza

This sound also exists in some dialects of English. It is a glottal stop. It means that you literally close and explosively open your vocal cords. Try this in imitation Lancashire, “t’other day”.

The sound is more common in classical than in dialect, but it does exist in dialect and you need to get it right.

su’aal.

Your Arabic teachers will have to teach you how to write it, because this is a bit complicated.

We are almost there, because I can deal with the last four sounds together in one group.

13. The back consonants, Saad, Daad, Tah, and DHah

Sometimes a language adds an extra ingredient to the pronunciation of some of the consonants. These extra ingredients can include ‘secondary articulation’, which means they are added to existing sounds. Now there are various ways of doing this. Arabic uses only one way, called ‘velarisation’. In simple English it means they are said from the back of your mouth.

I want you to imagine you are talking posh. Talking to someone who belongs to rich high society and looks down on poor mortals like you and me. “I think you will find they speak with a special posh accent, and look down their noses at common people like me” [said in the posh way]. Try it now.

Try again, and this time notice the effect on the vowels. What do you notice? I hope you notice that this extra velarisation, these extra sounds coming from the back of the mouth, mean that many of the vowels are pushed back. And this is your clue: back vowels go with back consonants. Now, practice some words. I have deliberately made some contrasting pairs, even if one of the words does not exist. In each case here, the one with the back consonants in them is the real word.

sabbéet, SabbaaT (shoes)
saHHa, SaHHa (health)
séédiq, Saadiq (sincere)

In practice, it is often difficult to hear and say the difference. In dialect the difference is much less than in classical. But you must try to make the difference. Arabs can hear the difference. You must learn.

Now in Tunisian there is a little nuance. In some parts of the Arab world, Daal exists, but not in Tunisian. Words which usually have Daal in them are pronounced with DH, which means they break the usual Arabic rule, one letter one sound. This is true even when Tunisians speak classical. Now we have two letters for one sound, letters 26 and 27. Usually, but there is one fun exception where Tunisians break their own rule. I actually love to tease my students of linguistics with this example. Ramadan is written ramaDaan. رمضان , which should be said as ramaDHaan but is usually said, even in Tunisia, as ramaDaan.

That almost concludes the consonants. There are a few more points to make before I finish.

14. Consonant doubling: the shadda.

All consonants can be doubled. In fact, doubling the middle consonant of a verb is a way of changing its meaning from simply doing something, into making something happen. This is the basis for many pairs of meaning, for instance, I learn: I teach, nuqra: nqarri.

Old English had double consonants. Have you ever wondered why in English spelling, which is based on pronunciation habits of centuries ago, there are so many double consonants in English words? ‘Letter, connect, happen’. Go ahead, practice this in English, then apply it to Arabic.

As a general rule, a learner of a language should speak slowly and emphatically. It is OK to exaggerate a little. If you get the main features of the sounds right by a little extra care, then the features which are not quite right will be ignored.

Another rule in languages is to notice the contrasts, and maintain them. In English there are short vowels and long vowels. We never stop teaching students to 'keep the short vowels short and the long vowels long'. Now I know that in some accents, some dialects of English, people do not always follow this rule. But teachers of English all over the world insist that since it is easy to keep the short vowels short and the long vowels long, that students should make extra effort to do this. Now often a student of English will not say a vowel perfectly, but if the short/long distinction is clear, then the student will usually be understood.

One of the contrasts in Arabic is between short and long consonants, as well as between short and long vowels. Therefore, especially at the beginning, make sure that the double consonants really are double, or a bit more - not one and a half.

Another way of thinking about double consonants is to emphasise them, to pause while saying them.

15. Spanish speakers

If you do not speak Spanish, take a rest. You have deserved it if you have followed me so far. If you speak any Spanish, I am now going to make an important point. Spanish has two r's, a single r and a doubled r. It is very easy to think they are the same as 'rée and 'rr' in Arabic.

Sorry, they are not at all equivalent. You see, the single r in Spanish is not a trill. The tip of the tongue does not vibrate. In fact, the tip of the tongue makes one hit only against the upper mouth. Therefore the single r in Spanish is in fact half an Arabic r.

Now for the single Arabic r, it probably does not matter - you will be able to get away with the single Spanish r. But when Spanish people come to pronounce 'nqarri' they can end up saying 'nqari'. They need in fact to say the Spanish r four times. Maybe you do not make this mistake - I am only passing on to you what I have read. I do not speak Spanish. I know I need to be careful to make sure that my double consonants really are doubled.

Conclusions

With this I will finish. Now you know how to say all the sounds in Arabic. You need to go away now and practice pronunciation with arabs. And do take time to get your pronunciation clear, right at the beginning. If you rush ahead in other areas and neglect pronunciation, then later it will be much harder to go back and make changes. I did not say impossible. It is possible for advanced learners to work on their pronunciation. But it is much harder to make changes later. So take your time, get it right now, and you will reap the benefit. Thankyou for listening.