

## CHALLENGES OF ARAB STUDENTS LEARNING IN RUSSIAN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

**O.V. Belkina**, [belkinaov@susu.ru](mailto:belkinaov@susu.ru), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6641-5653>

**S.M. Kolova**<sup>✉</sup>, [kolovasm@susu.ru](mailto:kolovasm@susu.ru), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2887-3589>

*South Ural State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia*

**Abstract.** Recent growth of international contacts, expanding globalization in all spheres of life and education, constant increasing number of students from different countries (Arab), the necessity to promote cross-cultural understanding conditions for better adaptation in Russian educational environment make the study relevant. The research aims to identify major socio-cultural, psychological, educational, and language challenges, which Arab students might encounter in Russian tertiary educational environment. The study was conducted among 12 international MA (Philology) students. It employed Hofstede's cultural dimensions' theory as the leading theoretical framework via qualitative research with the data obtained from the interviews, classroom observations, and a survey. The research examined pivotal issues related to the differences and certain peculiarities of language learning in Iraq as compared to Russia. The gained experience and the data obtained during the three-year study have shown that Iraqi students lack critical thinking skills and analytical abilities due to the dominant deductive approach in language teaching in the home country. The research helped to classify major challenges with regard to expectations and requirements of the Arab students who study in Russian national research university (SUSU).

**Keywords:** Arab students, classification of challenges, tertiary education, Hofstede theory, critical thinking

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## ПРОБЛЕМЫ ОБУЧЕНИЯ АРАБСКИХ СТУДЕНТОВ В РОССИЙСКИХ ВУЗАХ

**О.В. Белкина**, [belkinaov@susu.ru](mailto:belkinaov@susu.ru), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6641-5653>

**С.М. Колова**<sup>✉</sup>, [kolovasm@susu.ru](mailto:kolovasm@susu.ru), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2887-3589>

*Южно-Уральский государственный университет, Челябинск, Россия*

**Аннотация.** Рост международных контактов в последнее время, глобализация всех сфер жизни и особенно образования, постоянное увеличение числа студентов из разных стран (арабских), необходимость развития социо-культурного понимания для лучшей адаптации в российской образовательной среде обуславливают актуальность исследования. Цель исследования – выявить основные социокультурные, психологические, образовательные и лингвистические проблемы, с которыми сталкиваются арабские студенты в российской образовательной среде. Исследование было проведено среди 12 зарубежных магистрантов-филологов. Основной теоретической базой является теория культурных измерений Хофстеде. Авторы провели качественное исследование с использованием данных, полученных в результате интервьюирования, наблюдения, опроса. В ходе исследования были рассмотрены ключевые вопросы, связанные с различиями и некоторыми особенностями языкового обучения в Ираке по сравнению с Россией. Накопленный опыт и полученные данные в течение трёхлетнего исследования показали, что у иракских студентов слабо развиты навыки критического мышления вследствие доминирующего дедуктивного подхода в языковом обучении на родине.

Кроме того, во время обучения в российских вузах им приходится решать проблемы, связанные с различиями в менталитете, культуре и языке. На основе исследования классифицированы основные проблемы, связанные с ожиданиями и требованиями арабских студентов, обучающихся в Российском национальном исследовательском университете (ЮУрГУ).

**Ключевые слова:** арабские студенты, классификация трудностей, высшее образование, теория Хофстеде, критическое мышление

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## Introduction

Today's world is profoundly different from what we used to have even a decade ago. Modern society witnesses global paradigm shifts in all spheres of life; besides, the collapse of obsolete political, business, educational patterns gives impetus not only to technological breakthroughs altering our reality; but what is the most important, to transformation of social institutions.

Education, especially tertiary one, responds promptly to emerging trends in society. Immigration processes, scope of global communication, professional and academic mobility, an ever-growing number of collaborative projects contributed significantly to internationalization of education.

In May 2017, Russia launched the implementation of the project "Export of Education", under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Science of Russian Federation. To that end, a Consortium of Universities has been created, which currently includes 39 of the largest universities in Russia. The ambitious goal of the project is to enhance the attractiveness of Russian educational programs for foreign students, increase awareness and brand status of Russian education in the international educational market.

According to the latest statistics, the amount of international students at Russian universities reached 183,000 in the academic year 2014/2015, 200,000 in 2015/2016 and 230,000 in 2016/2017 correspondingly [3]. Russia is regarded as a major educational destination mainly for the learners from the Middle East, Africa, China, etc.

The overwhelming majority of international students who study in Russian Universities is of Arabic origin. Inevitably, they tend to undergo numerous challenges, from severe weather conditions to radical differences in educational framework and cross-cultural communication.

## Statement of the Problem

There is limited capacity for Arab students to learn English via natural interaction in the target

language in their own countries; consequently, while studying in universities abroad, they encounter difficulties in all language learning skills, mainly in writing and analytical reading [13]. Some scholars claim that most Arab students are not sufficiently motivated due to limited usage of English as a medium of communication in their own countries [15]. Stress, alienation, and difficulties in adjusting to the host culture complicate dramatically the process of study of Arab students [10]. All these issues make the research urgent and relevant nowadays.

## Goals and Objectives

The ultimate goal of the research is to identify and classify major educational, cultural, social, communicative, language challenges, encountered by Arab students in the Russian University.

The three primary objectives of this study are to:

- reveal cultural and social differences that prevent student integration into Russian tertiary educational environment;
- examine radical distinctions in approaches to teaching in both countries;
- investigate and classify the most frequent and urgent educational, cultural, social, communicative, language problems which affect university instruction for Arab students.

## Methodology

**Setting.** The study was conducted in the Russian National Research University, a member of a special government run program Project 5-100 aimed at developing major Russian universities. The University offers all academic degree programs to students from more than 52 countries.

Primarily, this study centers around qualitative research with the data obtained from classroom observations, face-to-face interviews and a survey.

A three-year research is focused on Arab students, participants of the Master's Course in Philology, the total number of students is 12, among them there are 8 male and 4 female stu-

dents from Iraq. The average age is about 32 years; the educational background is bachelor's degrees mainly in Humanities granted in Iraq. Some students have been employed in school teaching; some have an experience working for non-governmental organizations.

**Data Collection Methods. Interview and Classroom Observation.** This research primarily draws on qualitative research; therefore, the data collection can be obtained via various methods. In order to accomplish the objectives, mentioned above, we resort to interview, classroom observations and survey.

Owing to the fact that the groups are relatively small, individual interviews and classroom observations tend to be the most convenient tool for investigation.

The interview questions were carefully constructed and reviewed based on research objectives. The students were interviewed in English and their responses were recorded via web-camera. All the procedures were conducted in their usual classrooms, which did not cause any anxiety or stress among international students. The further analysis of the interviews recorded revealed their willingness to share information, give comprehensive descriptions of their feelings, opinions, experiences, etc. Thus, the interview turns out to be the source of acquiring reliable extensive data. Interaction involved both verbal and non-verbal means of communication. All data collected were carefully revised and fully examined by the researchers.

The most comprehensive picture for analysis is provided when interviews are supported by classroom observation. These two methods allowed us to gain a complete description of the situation, classroom atmosphere, including student interaction. Regretfully, recording sometimes did not prove to be successful due to particular embarrassment of students, especially female ones; their behavior in front of the camera changed radically; so the most appropriate option was making the detailed notes, made during the classes, which provided a clear and detailed picture of what was happening inside the class and during our observation. The classroom observation helped us to reveal the major issues of concern, which subsequently were transformed into interview questions and finally grouped for the survey.

Both methods (interview and classroom observations) allowed us to collect material for further substantial survey, to prioritize the categories

and aspects for the most important issues of our research.

**Data Collection Methods. Survey.** Survey is ranked to be one of the most reliable research methods. The questions for our survey were chosen thoroughly, after data processing and its further analysis related to Arab students' learning. However, as we have already mentioned above, the participants of our research, appeared to be in different cultural and educational environment. All of them came to Russia for the first time, gaining their experience from books, films and the Internet. Of course, since they have lived in Russia for a short period, the majority of them might still be in the "early stage" of culture shock [21]. At this stage of adaptation, their personal role expectation, experience of confusion, clash of strong self-identity feeling and feeling of different values made their life and studies in Russian environment a bit shocking and stressful. Our observations and interviews facilitated the drawing of conclusions that the educational practices and philosophies at home were fundamentally different if compared to Russia. In all cases, Arab students were trapped between two sets of conflicting experiences. Problems such as teacher-dominated classroom, obsolete textbooks, memorization and rote learning, lack of communicative and language skills – all that have been taken into consideration by us, while preparing the survey content and research questions.

We consider that the research questions we have chosen for the survey based on the analysis made are general, broad and flexible. The purpose of the study is not to seek predictions or any explanations, but to provide deeper understanding of the issues from the perspectives of the small groups of students.

#### **Literature review**

Many scholars raised the pivotal issue of recognizing and identifying the most frequent difficulties that international students face. Arab students fall under a special category due to some peculiarities.

Canadian researchers tend to perceive Arab students as knowledge tellers, who merely reproduce information provided in comparison with Western learners who are rather knowledge transformers, able to integrate information into personal and critically meaningful concepts [7]. This is the result of dominance of traditional deductive teaching methods in Arab countries. Schmitt emphasizes the formality and rigidity of the educational system in terms of EFL teaching, which

usually entails the use of rote memorization, traditional drills and structured exercises [14]. The assignments that presuppose the fact that ideas and answers are elicited and need to be discussed, encounter resistance among Arab learners; the tasks that require expression of personal opinions or original thoughts are considered unsound and unfair [9, 19].

Some educators tend to recognize three distinctive features that characterize education in the Arab world, i.e. government-regulated curriculum, the intensive religious studies, and rote-type learning. Consequently, learner autonomy in general is scored extremely low. Religious congruence issues, cultural resistance to self-expression, and inflexible pedagogical background affect the way Arab students approach learning, as a whole, and EFL learning, specifically [16].

Many sociolinguists concede that stress and anxiety arise when people, representatives of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, cannot meet their basic and educational needs as it happens in their own culture: they face misunderstanding, and cannot figure out why locals speak or behave the way they do. Certain experts, for instance, suppose that lack of proficiency in the host language is the most frequently occurred problem of adaptation by international students [20].

Several American TESOL experts claim that Arab students usually come to host countries being aware that the teacher will be make tremendous efforts for providing them with the most favourable supportive, and motivating learning environment whereas students themselves remain passive due to lack of cultural and linguistic expectations of English [12].

Russian educators point out the fact in some Arab countries number of women among university teaching staff is extremely scarce; consequently, students from such countries have to deal with certain psychological difficulties while getting used to Russian women professors.

### **Research and data analysis**

**Student Background.** The greatest advantage of most Arab students who join the Philology Master's Course in our University is completion of the first post-secondary education in their native country – a Bachelor's degree in Linguistics. Thus, our target audience is represented by students with so-called conscious experience, motivated to get further higher education in the same academic and professional area.

It should be mentioned that majority of

the students enrolled are sponsored by the Iraqi Government scholarship programs. This financial support presupposes academic excellence. On the one hand, it is a powerful motivational impetus, on the other hand, when students fail to get excellent marks, they tend to be a bit pushy in their efforts to make the teacher reconsider his/her decision.

The students in general have a good command of English, with certain peculiarities in the receptive skill – analytical reading and the productive skill – analytical writing. Due to formal instruction approach dominant in Iraqi education, the teaching process has a rigid structure carried out under a strict control of the teacher. Consequently, students lack the developed skill of critical thinking qualities and habits of keen observation. Besides, according to students, their classes in Iraqi educational establishments are enormously overcrowded which complicates the application of personalized approach to every student and does not allow him / her expressing himself / herself.

Student motivation to develop their educational path and get a higher academic degree emerges mainly from their family environment when relatives are involved into education and academic research. One more reason is an opportunity to get a Government financial support and get employment in the University, which is an aspirational and ambitious goal for many students from Iraq as it guarantees enhancement of social status and promises a significant rise in salary.

Besides, the Iraqi Government launched military transition assistance programs aimed at retraining former military service members. One of our students completed the Bachelor's course in College of Languages in University of Baghdad, and then became an army officer, and after transformation and reorganization of the Iraqi military system, he was offered the Government scholarship for Master's program abroad.

All students irrespective of their background are diligent learners and express the desire to be competent and proficient specialists.

**Radical Distinction in Approaches to Teaching.** We reviewed some publications and articles concerning the approaches to teaching different aspects of the language and concluded that curricula of many English departments in Arab Universities (Universities of Bagdad, Iraq, Damascus, Syria, Jordan, Amman, etc.) are heavily dominated by the literature component [22]. The focus on literature study does not only pre-

vail in university linguistic curricula of the English departments, but also shapes syllabi of Arabic schools. The language component itself turns out to be in weaker position, which significantly complicates further study abroad for Arab students [11].

The lack of balance in general knowledge and analytical skills of Arab students is becoming increasingly obvious in the teaching / learning process. They are aware of certain conceptions and phenomena, peculiarities of the major subject, but when it comes to the necessity not merely to reproduce, but to generate something, Arab students tend to fail. They abuse “copy-and-paste” approach; even paraphrasing poses an evident challenge. The problem is that they are so much dependent on the ideas of primary sources that they seem to be unable to synthesize and interpret them in their own words.

University education in Russia shifts to use of inductive teaching / learning via a range of instructional methods, including ESA (Engage, Study, Activate), OHE (Observe, Hypothesize, Experiment), EEE (Explore, Explain, Express), TBL (Task-Based Learning), PBL (Project-Based Learning). Thus, students are not passive recipients anymore, but active participants of the educational interaction, where the teacher is just a facilitator, organizer and a guide who uses the method of scaffolding for eliminating obstacles and supporting with advice. Language teaching in Russia applies different educational techniques and strategies; a special emphasis is placed on cooperative learning, embracing communicative, socio-cultural and cross-cultural methodology, where student-center approach is widely used.

In contrast, education in majority of Arab countries is teacher-centered based on deductive approach. A teacher provides pre-packaged set of knowledge for the learners who strictly follow the rules and instructions. Arab students feel most comfortable in prescriptive learning environment where they are not required to be autonomous learners.

**Cultural and Social Differences.** Needless to say, any international student faces challenges being involved into a totally new environment, in terms of expressing his/her educational, cultural and religious needs and adapting in completely new and different culture.

In our classes, we pay special attention to the main social and cultural differences in student behavior, empathy, flexibility and tolerant judg-

ment, which are considered to be of great importance. During seminars and workshops, we focus on special content emphasizing the importance of intercultural awareness, intercultural skills and existential competence. The learners acquire the qualities of “cultural speakers”, gain necessary soft (transferrable) skills for developing successful personal, professional and academic relationship with people of other languages and culture [17].

Studying the language in the course framework can be compared to certain exploration, a sort of adventurous discovery of brave new world. Cultural learning conducted in the foreign language has the implicit aim to imitate a native speaker in terms of linguistic competence, host country knowledge and awareness about the culture of the country [5].

The concept of “culture” is one of the thorny issues for discussions between the teacher and Arab students. It admits of numerous interpretations and definitions (the students tend to be resourceful and diverse in their attempts to define this phenomenon) and reflects evolutionary changes in literature, art and philosophy.

Most of Arab students point out that during their English classes in their native country their teachers never talked or touched upon cultural aspects of the studied language. The focus of their University study was shifted towards prose, poetry and drama without proper analysis of the cultural and communicative discourse reflected in this literature.

On the contrary, we believe that modern language teaching should incorporate special content emphasizing the importance of intercultural awareness.

During our discussions, students claim that they observe clash of different cultures in multicultural world, i.e. Russian, European, North American, Latin American, Oriental and Middle East ones. Students admit that their lack of cultural knowledge in this area is obvious [2]. Thus, filling the gaps in cross-cultural knowledge, developing understanding of general culture contexts and their implications will enable international students to adapt to new conditions, be active participants in the social and professional interaction.

Besides, while communicating, interlocutors should see other people as equal participants of the team activities. Arab students though, tend to focus on their individuality, emphasizing the significance of their own achievements, striving to

stand out of the crowd: i.e. their fellow students [6]. Their ultimate desire is to be recognized as “the best of the best” and praised by the teacher both publicly and privately.

**Cultural Dimensions by Hofstede.** Geert Hofstede cultural dimensions’ theory is rated as a top methodology while analyzing cultural and communicative hurdles by international experts.

According to his taxonomy, in terms of the long / short-term orientation parameter, Arabs and Russians (recipient / host culture) differ much from each other. For short-term cultures traditional approaches are of primary significance, developing relationships are vital, time perception is relevant. Thus, the future and the past are inter-related; things could be easily delayed. The opposite of this approach is a long-term orientation. Time is perceived as a vector, and people tend to look into the future rather than be focused on the present or recall the past. Achieving goals and appreciating results obtained is a priority.

Russia’s index in this category is 81, which means that it is a very pragmatic culture with a long-term focus on the future. In societies with a pragmatic orientation, people believe that truth depends largely on the situation, context and time. They demonstrate the ability to easily adapt traditions to changing conditions, reveal a pronounced tendency to invest in the future, show perseverance in achieving total completed results.

As for Iraq, on the contrary, the indicator in this category is 25, which can be interpreted as belonging to a normative culture, where people strive to establish the absolute truth; demonstrate respect for tradition, a relatively small tendency to save and invest in the future, and focus on achieving quick results.

Power distance dimension expresses the degree of inequality among people, which the population of the country considers normal. This refers, e.g., to the distance between authorities and subordinates in society. Iraq scores high on this dimension, 95 as well as Russia, 93, which means that people respect power, accept a hierarchical order, value status symbols.

One more important dimension is uncertainty avoidance, or the degree to which people prefer structured over unstructured situations. This refers to the existence of rigid rules and regulations in some cultures and a high degree of flexibility, ad hoc decisions and improvisation in others. In countries where this index is very high, i.e. Iraq – 85, Russia – 95, people feel more comfortable and secure with a system of rules and

regulations, even if many of these are impractical [11].

In terms of education, it means that Arab students tend to be more focused on achieving immediate short-term goals; have certain problems with time management, quite often fail to meet deadlines. They feel secure when they are given over-detailed instructions and when the teacher performs strict and tough control over completion of every single task and assignment. Furthermore, students demonstrate sometimes even exaggerated respect towards their professors, addressing to them as “honored Professor” and emphasizing their academic degrees and achievements.

Arab students can also be characterized by a certain disciplinary nihilism, dislike of pedantry and scrupulousness, increased impulsiveness, incontinence in the expression of feelings.

**Gender Sensitivity.** According to the world practice and our teaching experience, gender sensitivity proves to be another thorny constituent in intercultural communication. It should be noted that in many Arab countries, classes at schools are divided along gender lines, and consequently, further mixing of the sexes may potentially result in a certain emotional turmoil [19]. Female students, e.g., tend to get a bit embarrassed and flustered in the presence of male students while being involved into pair / team activities [8]. The interaction between Russian female professors and Arab learners’ should be solely based on strict professional relationship with regard to learners’ mentality and their individual distinctive features within Russian educational tertiary environment.

**Language differences and peculiarities.** In our opinion, international students face another difficulty in their education abroad. It is the influence of the target language on the way of perception via source language, the interdependence of the language as an indicator of ethnic mentality and thinking [4]. By recognizing obvious interrelation of language and thinking, it is necessary to admit the existence of a correlation between certain types of language and certain types of thinking.

There are many typologies of languages; one of the most significant is the classification by the method of expression of grammatical meanings by means of internal or external resources, that is, the synthetic / analytical dichotomy. Arabic and Russian are synthetic languages whereas English is of analytical nature.

The structural unit of English language is the sentence. If we divide the sentence into separate units, i.e. words, quite often the meaning can be quite vague. In contrast, the structural unit of the synthetic language is the word. When dividing a sentence into individual words, they, as a rule, retain their basic meaning [18].

While dealing with the course conducted in the English language, it should be remembered that the way of delivery of the course material, compiled in accordance with the norms of the English language, would inevitably influence the way information is perceived by international (Arab) students [12]. English-speaking interlocutors think and comprehend information in separate and complete sentences-phrases. This means the following.

1) The English-speaking addresser encodes the thought to the very end, and only then delivers it to his / her addressee (“Listen first, think later”). The first word, sometimes even the first sounds of the phrase may require the completion of the thought coding process. That is why the addresser should carefully construct the message, especially if the sentences include complex verbal forms, infinitive and participial constructions. Meanwhile, the more complex and sophisticated analytical construction is used by the addresser, the fewer opportunities remain to restructure the sentence if the need arises.

2) English speakers understand the address message completely, and then decipher it (“Listen first, think later”). When a separate word is acquired, the recipient is engaged in the initial understanding and partial rethinking of the words that were previously identified. Then, when you hear the second word in the text, the recipient initially understands and at the same time interprets some of the first words again. (according to the second significant word). Thus, the “reception” of the third word and its preliminary understanding is accompanied by a partial consideration of the first and second words (according to the previously significant third word), etc. And only after the perception of the last word, the recipient is able to fully decipher the entire message and correctly understand its content.

Accordingly, the analytical nature of the English language places high demand on the attention of the international interlocutor (namely Arab student), requires fast cognitive abilities, willingness for adaptation.

**Phonetics and Spelling.** In terms of phonology, another matter of concern for Arab students

is totally different system of vowels and consonants. In the English language, there are about 22 vowel phonemes (vowels themselves and diphthongs) and 24 consonant phonemes, versus the Arabic language with only eight vowel and 32 consonant phonemes. The Arabic words are so-to-say based on a sequence of vowel-less consonants. Consequently, Arab learners deal with entirely new phonetic arrangement of the speech, they quite often mispronounce English vowels which results in misunderstanding as Russian professors delivering lectures and holding seminars tend to use RP (Received Pronunciation).

Besides, for Arab learners unconventional spelling patterns of English are particularly challenging as in the Arabic orthography only consonants and long vowels are to be written. Cursive system of the Arabic spelling running from right to left differs immensely from English orthography, which inevitably causes some problems both in writing and text formatting and editing. Arab students often give a low priority to correct spelling in their writing activity, perhaps that on the first stage of education – in high school – spelling mistakes were not strictly penalized and, as a result, they are further fiercely contested by Arab students while doing tests, exams and writing a Master’s thesis [2].

So, Arab learners are not be expected to deal with reading or writing (with regard to phonetics and spelling) at the same level or pace as other students who are characterized by the same skill level [19].

### **Survey Results**

Generally, to interpret data obtained, researchers use the survey containing the questions made up in accordance with a Likert scale. Likert scales are widely used to measure attitudes and opinions with a greater degree of nuance than a simple “yes/no” question. Nevertheless, we decided to add to the classical scale some more positions where the students have to choose the presence or vice versa, absence of some phenomena they encountered in the Russian University. The students were offered to answer the following questions:

The survey was placed in the Google Disk (Google-forms format), all 12 students in 3 years willingly went through the survey and we got the following results.

The first question was about the satisfaction with the course delivered in English by Russian teachers. The chart shows that 91,7% of Arab students are very much satisfied with it and only 8,3% – i.e. one student – is not so much satisfied.

Table 1

## Survey Results

Issues to be discussed	Variants			
1. How much are you satisfied with the university courses, delivered in English?	Very much 91,7%	Not so much 8,3%	Little –	None –
2. Assess the quality of instruction in the Russian university according to your expectations	Very high 58,2%	High 41,7%	Not so high –	Low –
3. Did you have any cultural challenges while learning in Russia?	Yes 58,3%	No 41,7%	Do not know –	–
4. What cultural differences did you face, while studying in Russian University? Tick the necessary: – different mentality; – hostility(xenophobia); – gender inequality; – teacher’s dominance; – teacher’s flexibility; – fear of looking silly (“not appropriately smart”) in front of the international students and students of the same nationality; – wish to be “the best of the best” and desire to be praised publicly	(Ticked out of 100%) 41,7% – 41,7% 33,3% 16,7%  33,3% 25%			
5. Do you find it urgent for a teacher to be competent in cultural differences?	Yes 83,3%	No –	Do not know 16,7%	–
6. Is there any gap between your educational expectations and learning outcome?	Yes 16,7%	No 75%	Do not know 8,3%	–
7. Do you share an opinion that writing is no so much important compared to speaking (punctuation rules, keeping to alphabet format, paragraphing, mixing capital and small letters)?	Yes 16,7%	No 75%	Do not know 8,3	–
8. Do you find it difficult to analyze some data not merely copy-and-paste practice?	Yes 54,5%	No 45,5%	Do not know –	–
9. Do you expect your teacher to spend a lot of time on correcting your errors by detailed explanations and continuous language support?	Yes 66,7%	No 33,3%	Do not know –	–
10. Do you expect the process of research rather distressing and frustrating due to the excessive pressure, deadlines, time-consuming nature?	Yes 33,3%	No 50%	Do not know 16,7%	–
11. Do you find it difficult while an answering teacher’s questions to focus on the issue itself rather than demonstrating general knowledge?	Yes 41,7%	No 50%	Do not know 8,3%	–
12. Are phonetic skills important for your study?	Yes 66,7%	No 33,3%	Do not know –	–

There were no answers like little satisfaction or none.

Then second point was a quality of instruction taking into consideration the learners’ expectations. So, we got the following results – 58,3% estimated as very high and 41,7% simply as high. There were no negative answers or answers like “do not know”.

The third point was about cultural challenges of studying in Russian educational environment. 58,3% answered “yes”, consequently 41,7% answered “no”.

The fourth point was to identify cultural differences. Only one person pointed out that he (or she) did not experience any of them, while

36,4 % ticked the points on different mentality and gender sensitivity. To our great pleasure, there were no cases of hostility or xenophobia (none of Arab students ticked these points), three participants (27,3%) pointed out teacher’s dominance (if compared to their home teacher-dominated classroom style). Half of them were afraid of the feeling “looking silly, not appropriate” (interviewing them, we also found out that they were not afraid of any other international students, but their main fear was “not to look silly” at the presence of the students from other Arab countries, (they even refused to make presentations in their presence).

The fifth question was also connected with

the cross-cultural aspects; whether it is urgent for a teacher to be culturally competent – the percentage of positive answers was 81,8%, while the others 18,2% answered “do not know”.

There was no gap between educational expectations and learning outcome for 72,7 % of the students, while for 18,2% of the participants there was.

As per the attitude to writing, compared to speaking (punctuation rules, keeping to alphabet format, paragraphing, mixing capital and small letters), 72,2% of Arab students pointed out that it matters much and 18,2% said “no”.

For the question about analysis and copy-paste practice – 50% found it difficult and 50% not.

Answering the question about continuous language support, correcting mistakes and detailed explanations, 63,3% of the participants regarded it as very important.

Almost half of the respondents did not expect the process of research rather distressing and frustrating due to the excessive pressure, deadlines, time-consuming nature – 54,5%, for 27,3% it was.

The same percentage was obtained for the question about the difficulty while answering teacher’s questions to focus on the issue itself rather than demonstrating general knowledge, while 36,4% answered positively.

In addition, the last point, which seemed to be a “thorny issue” for Russian teachers of English – was about phonetics. Surprisingly, 72,2% – answered that phonetic skills important for their studies, while 27,7% gave negative answers.

#### **Summary and conclusions**

According to the objectives of our research, we can classify challenges with regard to expectations and requirements of the Arab students who study in Russian universities. They are:

1) educational, i.e radical distinctions in teaching approaches: deductive vs inductive, teacher-centred vs student-centred; lack of balance in general knowledge and not developed analytical skills;

2) cultural, i.e. long-term focus on the future in Russian pragmatic culture vs short-term focus on achieving quick results in Iraqi normative culture; predominance of self-centered concept behavior;

3) psychological, i.e. gender sensitivity vs gender equality; lack of developed team skills; preoccupation with religious beliefs;

4) language, i.e. synthetic nature of the Ara-

bic language vs analytical nature of the English language; radical differences in phonetics, spelling, grammar and syntax.

Conducting our classes, we also noticed that most of the students lack communication skills. During the interviews and classroom observations, practical classes of “Intercultural Communication” and “Cross-cultural studies”, the students tend to compare educational experience in their home countries with the Russian one. As we have already mentioned above, education in oriental countries have fundamental differences in educational philosophies and practices. Teacher-dominated practical classes, lessons followed by memorization and recitation, rote learning, obsolete teaching materials and textbooks are common for Arabic educational background.

Our research has revealed that it is not easy to be a cross-cultural learner. The survey proved that it requires from foreign students determination, courage, and persistence to succeed in any academic tasks.

There appeared to be many educational and cross-cultural aspects that the learners need to adjust to, “learn to learn” and to get used to in Russian educational environment. However, all of them absolutely agreed that it was a very rewarding, useful and great learning experience. Some of our participants even mentioned that fact that they could never even imagine, that the English language could be learnt through the cultures, absorbing others language and behavioral experience, not merely via traditional grammar approach.

We could easily benefit from our great chance to be “on the edge” of three great cultures (the Arab, the English and the Russian one). In Russian educational linguistic environment, we are always involved in “dialogue of cultures”; Russian students, learning the English language, are active cross-cultural and communicative learners.

The experience described by the Arab learners of English in Russian educational environment can be characterized as interactive and cooperative. The research has proved that students have many positive opinions about Russian university education system, organization of classroom instructions, which they favored overwhelmingly. The most complimentary statements were addressed to the ways that classes provided students with considerable opportunities for practicing the communicative language skills, gaining different practical knowledge and that all of them

were encouraged and supported by the instructors in their desire to be the “best of the best” learners.

All of the students’ views and insights should be of great concern to all of us – language teachers, teacher educators. Some students share the ideas that their mission is not only to teach English as a foreign language, but also to preserve culture and to be a “man of culture” in their Homeland. We have concluded that teaching methods Arab students have experienced before focused only on local cultural awareness as a component of foreign language studies, as well as teaching methods developing merely linguistic competence. In addition to their good linguistic knowledge (morphology, syntax, etc.), they should be able to use their knowledge in communication

processes in order to be culturally educated learners of the language.

Besides, it is becoming increasingly obvious that Arab learners are to be provided with every opportunity to participate publicly in student scientific activities, i.e. conferences, presentations, round-table discussions, role-plays, etc.

Moreover, special emphasis is to be placed on development of research skills: analytical reading, critical thinking, search and proper analysis of information.

Another important point that requires improvement is their lack of editing skills. They should learn how to deal with paperwork, by thoroughly preparing research paper, articles, presentations via continuous teacher’s guide.

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***Information about the authors***

**Oksana V. Belkina**, Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, South Ural State University, Chelyabinsk, [belkinaov@susu.ru](mailto:belkinaov@susu.ru).

**Svetlana M. Kolova**, PhD in Pedagogy, Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, South Ural State University, Chelyabinsk, [kolovasm@susu.ru](mailto:kolovasm@susu.ru).

***Информация об авторах***

**Белкина Оксана Валентиновна**, доцент кафедры иностранных языков, Южно-Уральский государственный университет, Челябинск, [belkinaov@susu.ru](mailto:belkinaov@susu.ru).

**Колова Светлана Михайловна**, кандидат педагогических наук, доцент кафедры иностранных языков, Южно-Уральский государственный университет, Челябинск, [kolovasm@susu.ru](mailto:kolovasm@susu.ru).

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