

Whose Business is it to Teach English Numerals

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ABSTRACT

A queer incident happened at an Arab airport. The immigration officer detected an anomaly in the documents of a minor child. While the passport of the minor indicated that she was born on March 13, the visa issued by the Arab government was for a child born on March 31. The family was stranded. It took several hours for the error to be detected, and many more before the minor was allowed into the country. The error was because of the way numerals are stated and written in Arabic which is distinctly different from that in English.

Teaching numerals is the domain of Mathematics. But teaching the linguistic aspects of the numerals is a language teacher's task. Most languages employ a uniform method in stating cardinal numbers from 1 to 20. But between 21 and 99, barring the double numbers, there is no uniformity. As an illustration, the number 37 could be stated in five different ways. While some languages state the 'tens' first followed by the 'units', (thirty + seven), some state the 'units' followed by the 'tens' (seven + thirty). A third states the 'tens' and uses an 'and' before the 'units' (thirty and seven), while the fourth states the 'units' and employs an 'and', before the 'tens' (seven and thirty). So, when adults learn an L2, learners could face problems, especially in writing these numerals. This researcher, engaged in teaching English as L2 to Arab learners, encountered some problems unique to them. For example, when asked to write the numeral 'twenty four', several learners wrote 42. This error could have disastrous consequences in the banking industry. This paper attempts to present this problem to teachers of Business English, account for their occurrence and suggest methods to overcome it.