

Learner profile: Urdu

This guide presents common challenges faced by Urdu learners of English and typical features of language production. Please note, these guidelines are intended to advise teachers on areas where students may experience problems. However, native speakers may not all find the following points challenging.



Facts

- **Language family:** Urdu is an Indo-European language and is one of the Western Hindi languages.
- **Native speakers:** Over 68 million speakers.
- **Second language speakers:** Over 101 million speakers.
- **Location:** Urdu is an official language in Pakistan and India. It is a recognised minority language in the United Arab Emirates and Nepal. Urdu is also spoken in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Botswana, Fiji, Germany, Guyana, Malawi, Mauritius, Norway, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Thailand, United Kingdom, United states of America and Zambia.
- **Writing system:** The Urdu abjad is written right to left.

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Pronunciation

- The 'th' sound in 'think' and 'then', which is not a feature of Urdu, may be pronounced as a 't' or 'd' by native speakers.
- The 'r' in Urdu sounds like the middle sound in 'water' in American English and they might have difficulties pronouncing the 'r' in British English.
- There is no 'w' sound in Urdu and so 'w' may be pronounced as a 'v'.
- There are fewer combinations of consonant clusters in Urdu than in English and some English combinations, such as in 'film' and so native speakers may insert a vowel to create 'filam'. This is also a feature of Geordie English!

Grammar

- Urdu has no definite or indefinite articles, and this is a feature of English which native speakers may struggle with, either omitting or confusing English articles.
- The typical word order in Urdu is subject-object-verb. Urdu has postpositions instead of prepositions and so native speakers may transfer this word order when learning English, so 'on the floor' becomes 'floor on'.
- In Urdu, information about gender, number, person and respect is encoded into the verb. Pronouns can be omitted in Urdu and native speakers might be tempted to also omit them in English. Urdu native speakers also sometimes confuse male and female pronouns in English. Speakers may forget to say 'please' and 'thank you' because respect is expressed in other ways in their native tongue.

Writing

- Only long vowels and consonants are written in Urdu and so short vowels may be omitted when writing in English.
- Urdu speakers must learn the Roman alphabet and learn to read left to right.
- Urdu speakers may struggle with English punctuation, which is either different or not as common in written Urdu, for example, the full stop is written with a dash (-).
- In Urdu, as in Arabic, letters change form depending on their position in the word. Therefore, spaces between words aren't necessary to show word boundaries. This is another feature which Urdu native speakers might need to practise.

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Recommended FlashAcademy® lessons

Some lessons which might help based on the above differences:

Beginner > A few basics > Personal pronouns

Beginner > Phonics 1 > Additional Sounds

Beginner > Phonics 1 > Set 6

Beginner > Phonics 2 > Initial 'R' clusters

Beginner > Phonics 2 > 3-letter clusters

Beginner > Food & drink > Articles

Beginner > Family, Friends & Pets > How to be polite 2

Beginner > Shopping, Numbers & Colour > Sentence Building Blocks

Beginner > Punctuation > Full stops