

Diglossia and Arabic Literacy: From Research to Practice

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ABSTRACT: *Arabic-speaking children acquire literacy in a diglossic manner in which the variety of language engaged for reading and writing at school—referred to here as literary Arabic (LA)—differs from the variety they engage when speaking at home. Literacy acquisition in such a context necessitates teaching practices take into consideration the differences between spoken and literary varieties of language to assist children to bridge the gap between them. This study explores how Saudi teachers of kindergarten-level students perceive the effect of diglossia on the initial stages of literacy acquisition by their students, and which practices they follow to minimize its effect. The study participants took part in a focus group in which they shared their experiences of teaching literacy to Saudi kindergarten students, and reflected on their perceptions and practices as kindergarten teachers. Overall, the participants showed an awareness of how diglossia could generally affect literacy acquisition, as well as an awareness of how different spoken Arabic dialects work with and against LA to varying degrees, causing fluctuations in the diglossic effect across spoken varieties. In their context, however, teachers seemed to find children at a lesser disadvantage and would, therefore, prioritize remediating the challenges children experience as a result of orthographic characteristics of Arabic over the challenges posed by diglossia. Teachers indicated that they still follow certain practices to increase children's exposure to LA and reinforce their LA knowledge, but without pinpointing any specific diglossia-based instructions—interestingly, they believe this could compromise the orthographic-based instructions they believed essential. Such reflections are discussed in light of the current empirical investigations of Arabic literacy and diglossia and the pedagogical practices they suggest.*

KEYWORDS: Arabic, diglossia, literacy, orthography

INTRODUCTION

Developing literacy is the cornerstone of education. All children, whatever language they speak, start with learning how to represent phonemes—the smallest units of speech sounds—using graphemes—symbols of the writing system such as letters of the alphabet—at the outset of their education journey. However, developing literacy in a language such

as Arabic is unique in its challenges because of the diglossic context (Ferguson, 1959) within which it is developed. Arabic-speaking children are exposed to a spoken dialect from birth and develop the ability to use it for everyday communication. Later, they start school and are required to learn to read and write in a different variety, referred to as Literary Arabic (LA, and sometimes referred to as modern standard Arabic (MSA) or fusha). Although children are earlier exposed to LA through the media, the onset of formal education marks children's intensive exposure to this formal variety. The fact that LA and the spoken dialect differ phonologically, morpho-syntactically, lexically and semantically from each other (Ferguson, 1959; Maamouri, 1998) puts Arabic-speaking children at a disadvantage as they are not only required to learn orthographic representations of the spoken language, as all other children, but they are also required to learn new linguistic structures otherwise missing from their spoken variety (Saiegh-Haddad, 2003).

LA is used with a unified form and structure across the Arab world. Spoken varieties of Arabic, however, vary through different countries as they employ different dialects. Such dialectical variation could lead to variable diglossic effects as dialects differ in how closely they resemble LA (Saiegh-Haddad, 2022). Nevertheless, all Arabic-speaking children, without exception, acquire literacy in the unique context of diglossia regardless of their particular spoken dialect. From a linguistic perspective, all the Arabic spoken dialects are still linguistically different from LA; there is no Arabic dialect that contains identical linguistic units (e.g., phonemes or words) or structures that exist in LA. This formal representation of Arabic is usually more sophisticated and complex (Kaye, 2001; Saiegh-Haddad & Henkin-Roitfarb, 2014), and from a social perspective of this diglossic situation, the two language varieties are used complementarily rather than interchangeably, and serve different functions (Ferguson, 1959; Maamouri, 1998). Language variety use in diglossia is governed by context rather than speakers (Hudson, 2002). All Arabic native speakers, regardless of age, education, or socioeconomic status, use a spoken dialect for everyday communication, opposed to LA (Saiegh-Haddad, 2022). Such differences in structure and use between the two varieties give all Arabic-speaking children the inevitable diglossic context to their experiences when developing their literacy skills.

Diglossia is viewed as a major contributing factor to widespread illiteracy in the Arabic-speaking world (Ayari, 1996; Myhill, 2014) and its negative effects on children's literacy development is well documented through empirical investigations (Saiegh-Haddad, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007; Saiegh-Haddad, Levin, Hende, & Ziv, 2011; Saiegh-Haddad & Schiff, 2016). Therefore, in order to deliver maximum benefit, practices in the teaching and assessment of Arabic literacy must consider how far the child's spoken dialect is from LA (Khamis-Dakwar, 2020; Khamis-Dakwar & Makhoul, 2014; Saiegh-Haddad, 2022; Saiegh-Haddad & Everatt, 2017). This study attempts to investigate whether kindergarten teachers in Saudi schools are aligned with this requirement and aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do Saudi kindergarten teachers perceive diglossia and its effects on the early stages of literacy development in Arabic-speaking kindergarten students?
2. What teaching and assessment practices they follow to minimize the negative effects of diglossia on early literacy development in kindergarten students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a series of studies, Saiegh-Haddad (2003, 2004, 2005, 2007; Saiegh-Haddad et al., 2011) showed how the absence of certain LA phonemes, syllables and words from spoken dialects affect the phonological awareness of children who speak a Palestinian dialect. Children in these studies consistently found the LA-specific phonemes to be more difficult to isolate compared to the phonemes that already existed in their spoken repertoire, with difficulty increasing for kindergarteners when they were required to isolate an LA phoneme from an LA syllable or an LA word. Such effect of diglossia on phoneme isolation performance was found to be in an inverse relationship with the increase exposure to LA; the effect was most evident in kindergarten and lessened in the first and second grades, although children in those grades were still experiencing significant difficulties, with it only becoming statistically insignificant in the third grade.

Acquiring literacy in a diglossic context was also found to increase the cognitive demands on children as, in some aspects, it resembles second language literacy learning. Eviatar and Ibrahim (2000) compared kindergarten and first grade monolingual Arabic-speaking children with Hebrew monolingual and Russian-Hebrew bilingual counterparts on a variety of measures including phonological awareness, language arbitrariness, and vocabulary. Arabic-speaking children exhibited a pattern that resembles the bilingual children; better performance on phonological awareness and language arbitrariness tasks and poorer performance on the vocabulary task. This result was attributed by Eviatar and Ibrahim (2000) to the increase in language analysis demand placed on Arabic-speaking children as they are exposed to LA, which is also experienced by other children when they are exposed to a second language.

The diglossic situation necessitates helping children build a correct perception of the big picture in which their spoken dialect exists alongside formal LA, as well as helping them understand the finer details that enable them to locate and analyze the similarities and differences between the two language varieties. Arabic literacy curriculum should be “diglossia-centered”, in which a child’s spoken dialect should be the point of departure to embark on their literacy journey (Saiegh-Haddad, 2022, p. 156). In such an approach, children will be first introduced to the LA structures that already exist in their spoken dialects, before gradually moving to the more different structures (Saiegh-Haddad & Spolsky, 2014). For example, while teaching Arabic letters, children should not be introduced to them in the order in which they appear in the Arabic alphabet; rather, they should be first introduced to the letters that represent the phonemes that exist in their

spoken dialect and only after acquiring that knowledge should they be introduced to letters that represent phonemes exclusive to LA. Similarly, while teaching phonological awareness, children should be first introduced to LA words that also exist in their spoken dialect, and gradually introduced to the more unfamiliar LA words. Advancing children from the familiar to the less familiar can be applied to all linguistic structures: phonological, morphological, lexical, or syntactic (Saiegh-Haddad, 2022). In an extreme familiarity-focused version, children are not only supposed to start literacy acquisition with shared linguistic structures, but they are supposed to start with learning written representations of their spoken dialect until they become skilled enough to learn LA written representations (Myhill, 2014). While such a suggestion could possibly help children develop the alphabetic principles and phonemic awareness with more ease, and trigger their use of automatic processing for word identification (Saiegh-Haddad, 2022), it will remain pending on the approval of the society in which they learn, which may not be ready to accept such a crucial change in literacy learning (Maamouri, 1998; Saiegh-Haddad & Spolsky, 2014).

The fact that typically developed children find phonological structures that exist exclusively in LA to be more challenging than those structures that already exist in their spoken dialect has serious implications in the assessment and diagnosis of language disordered children (Khamis-Dakwar & Makhoul, 2014; Saiegh-Haddad & Everatt, 2017). The point is not that disordered children will exhibit similar performance patterns, as all linguistic structures, whether or not available in their spoken repertoire, would pose a challenge for them. However, starting with LA structures, which the typically developed child finds challenging, would minimize the truly existing performance differences between the typically developed and the disordered children. Highlighting such differences is crucial for the correct assessment and diagnosis of language-related problems (Saiegh-Haddad, 2020, 2022).

METHODS

Participants

A group of 11 Arabic language teachers in kindergartens from four different schools in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, participated in this study. All the teachers have at least eight years of experience in teaching reading and writing to Arabic-speaking children (mean years of experience = 10.4). Although recruiting teachers to participate from one school would have been easier, the teachers were selected from different schools to reflect a wide variety of practices and to avoid any bias that could result from school-informed teaching policies.

Data collection

Data in the current study was collected through a focus group that reflected the collective experience of the teachers as they shared reflections, ideas, practices, challenges and solutions. The number of participants was sufficient for a standard focus group, which

usually consists of six to 12 participants (Dörnyei, 2007). The discussion followed a semi-structured format consisting of open- and closed-ended questions. This format was selected to keep the discussion focused while at the same time allowing for a deeper investigation of emerging issues that could add to the data collection. The researcher moderated the discussion to ensure all planned topics were covered and to create space for participants to have equal input. The recorded session was held in spoken dialect and lasted for 90 minutes. Participants were informed of the presence of the audio recording equipment, assured of confidentiality, and given the opportunity to withdraw at any time during the discussion.

Data analysis

The researcher translated the recoded discussion from Arabic to English, and then transcribed it manually. Following a qualitative content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), similar remarks and reflections were coded and labelled to establish categories. After coding the entire data, the holistic picture emerged, enabling the linking of similar categories together to establish themes. Finally, the researcher rechecked the coding process to ensure it is consistent with the transcript.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Arabic teachers' perception of diglossia and its effect on literacy development was somehow unexpected. The teachers unanimously indicated that diglossia is a normal situation in Arabic-speaking countries and that it rarely causes confusion for children, and when it happens, this confusion is not serious and it does not amount to being an obstacle to literacy development. When probing the teachers on the factors that led them to create such a perception, they pointed out social and linguistic factors. Socially speaking, teachers indicated that parents are increasingly becoming aware of the importance of developing the LA repertoire of their children before they go to school. Fortunately, that increasing awareness is also associated with an easier access to LA material. Children used to be exposed to LA before school through the media, but the programs targeting children were limited and available only for a short amount of time. Nowadays, a variety of LA content directed at children are widely available across different social media platforms. Teacher 6 indicated:

Parents are aware of the importance of LA for their children's education. Awareness has increased significantly in the past few years. Parents have developed a more sense of responsibility for their children's education. Many parents depend on social media and new launched TV channels which exclusively present LA content for children. There are also those who prefer to rely on school as the major source of exposure to LA content. However, even those parents still quickly respond to any problems their children face when they start learning to read and write. Of course, there could be some exceptions, but parents are generally more collaborative and attentive to their children's literacy development.

Studies have shown that parents' attitudes and their literacy practices at home prior to education greatly contribute in bridging the gap between the spoken dialect and LA, providing the child with an advantage over his/her peers. For example, Feitelson, Goldstein, Iraqi and Share (1993) found that kindergarten children who had been listening to LA story reading daily over a period of five months out-performed their peers in LA language comprehension and production. Similarly, Abu-Rabia (2000) found that children in grades 1 and 2 who had been exposed to LA in preschools out-performed their peers who had been exposed only to a spoken dialect in measures of reading comprehension skills.

From a linguistic viewpoint, teachers indicated that they are aware of the differences between the literary and the spoken variety but that they believed such differences are very minor, especially at the phonological level that children depart from in their literacy development as they learn how to represent phonemes using letters. Teacher 3 indicated:

Upon going to school, children will learn the relationship between sounds and letters, and the sounds they already use every day in their spoken dialect is not that different from the LA sounds they will learn to represent with letters. Several dialects are spoken across Saudi Arabia and some of which may lack the sounds /θ/, /ð/, and /q/ while some may only lack /q/. Other Arabic spoken varieties such as the Egyptian could be less phonologically similar to LA, and that could increase literacy-related challenges for the children who speak it. Children who speak any of the Saudi dialects will only need to learn a very few number of sounds, and there is no way they did not hear these sounds at all before going to school.

Mustafawi (2017) compared the LA phonemic inventory, syllable structures and stress patterns with that of six major Arabic spoken varieties: Gulf, which includes the Saudi dialect, Iraqi, Levantine, Yemeni, Egyptian, and Maghrebi Arabic, and showed how they all varied from LA to different degrees and how even specific dialects can greatly differ within the six varieties. Saiegh-Haddad (2022) has drawn attention to the fact that the effect of diglossia will be common to all dialects but would vary from one dialect to another depending on how many linguistic structures the dialect misses from LA and when the child is exposed to these structures. Such variable diglossic effect across dialects could have serious implications for Arabic literacy research, teaching, and assessment. For example, when using LA phonological sensitivity tasks, ignoring how the child's spoken dialect differs from LA could jeopardize the validity of the task (Saiegh-Haddad, 2012).

It is worth mentioning that the diglossic effect that results from the missing LA linguistic items in a spoken dialect could still exist, and could also vary across dialects, even when Arabic native speakers are known to process their spoken dialect and LA with the same underlying processing mechanism. An Arabic complex word, whether in SA or LA, is processed by an "obligatory morphological decomposition" mechanism through which it is broken down into its basic morphemes: the *root*, which refers to a sequence of consonants

that carries a lexical meaning; and the *pattern*, which acts as a vocalic template for the root and carries a grammatical meaning. When a root is combined with a pattern, a word with a distinct meaning and grammatical function is created (Ryding, 2005). For example, a word such as /maktab/ (office) is broken down into the root /**k-t-b**/ and the pattern /**mafʕal**/. Therefore, it can facilitate the processing of a word that shares the same root, such as /**ka:tib**/ (writer), or pattern, such as /**madxal**/ (intel), regardless of being semantically unrelated (Boudelaa, 2014, p. 47; Boudelaa & Marslen-Wilson, 2013).

In the context of literacy development, research also found that morphological processing develops early in Arabic-speaking children (Saiegh-Haddad & Taha, 2017) and assists their ability of word reading (Abu-Rabia, Share, & Mansour, 2003; Mahfoudhi, 2007; Saiegh-Haddad & Geva, 2008) and spelling (Saiegh-Haddad, 2013; Taha & Saiegh-Haddad, 2016, 2017). Nevertheless, the effect of diglossia can be manifested in the child's literacy development, and can also vary across dialects, even if the literary and spoken varieties depend on the same morphological processing mechanism, and that could possibly happen because item-based learning is in effect (Hashem, 2022). According to Logan's *instance theory of automaticity* (1988, 1990), skilled performance does not depend on acquiring rules or processes that can be applied to different items, but it depends on encoding and retrieving specific items from memory. Logan (1988, 1990) suggests that automaticity in task performance is based on memory retrieval of specific items, which means it is item-based, not process-based, where improvement in performance does not transfer from one task to another depending on whether or not they share the same underlying processes, but rather depends on whether they share the same items. Therefore, it is these shared or missed items between the spoken dialect and LA, rather than any underlying processing mechanism, that will decide the depth of the gap between the particular dialect the child speaks and LA.

It is important to note that as LA—upon which Arabic literacy is based—is never used for communication in the everyday context, then Arabic-speaking children will never start their literacy acquisition as a homogenous group as their knowledge of LA would always vary. Therefore, teachers were further asked about the practices they follow to reinforce what children already know about LA and to present new LA materials to them. With regard to reinforcing children's LA knowledge, teachers highlighted the important role practice plays in transferring the child's receptive knowledge into production. Teacher 9 pointed out:

Practice is the key factor to LA development. The LA knowledge the child comes to school with has been built by watching and listening, so it is largely receptive. Even the child with the most advanced LA knowledge would not have a chance to practice speaking in LA before school given that it is not used in the everyday life. It is the role of the teacher to bring this knowledge to production. I teach my students to practice speaking in LA during

my class because I have noticed how such a practice can motivate them, make them more engaged in the classroom, and improve their overall language skills.

Regarding helping those whose LA knowledge seems to be below the level of their peers, all teachers indicated that they greatly depend on digital resources to introduce LA materials. Seven of the teachers have created specific channels on social media platforms where children can watch educational materials such as songs of the Arabic alphabets. Teachers also emphasized the importance of the traditional ways of teaching, such as the intensive practice of writing letters and short words in extracurricular material, which greatly helps children who need improvement.

Probing the teachers on the specific use of some techniques such as starting with presenting letters in words that already exist in children's spoken dialect, or even starting with teaching the letters that represent the phonemes that already exist in the children's spoken dialect, six of the teachers indicated that they do represent the letters to the children in an order that differs from their order of their appearance in the Arabic alphabet, but that they do so for reasons other than diglossia. The teachers indicated that they follow this technique to help children overcome the confusion they usually face because of Arabic letters' physical similarity. For example, the Arabic letters representing /b/, /t/ and /θ/ are ب – ت – ث – respectively, and they all appear as a sequence in the Arabic alphabet. Although Arabic Orthography consists of 28 letters, there are only 17 different basic shapes that are used in combination with dots to represent all the 28 letters (Eviatar, Ibrahim, Karelitz, & Simon, 2019). The teachers indicated that this similarity could confuse children, especially since these similar letters appear in sequence in the alphabet and would therefore deserve more attention than diglossia. Six of the teachers indicated that they have found that separating the presentation of similar letters to be helpful in minimizing confusion. The other five teachers indicated that they still present the letters in the order of appearance. Three out of those five teachers seem to be convinced that such representation should pose no problem as they focus an extended school period—around a week—on learning each letter. However, two of the teachers indicated that they usually present the letters in the order of their appearance in the alphabet only because they are required to follow the school curriculum. Interestingly, these teachers believed that separating the presentation of the similar letter would be better. To remediate this, the teachers follow the school curriculum when teaching the letters for the first time, but on later revisions change the order to separate similar letters. Teacher 2 indicated:

For me, I have no space for change as I have to follow the school curriculum. I present the letters in the same sequence of the alphabet and the similar letters appear one by one. Once we finish all the letters, I revise them to the students and I always revise them in a different sequence. That would not only minimize confusion but would also help me make sure that children can identify a given letter isolated from its physically similar peer(s).

Such remarks on how letter similarity in Arabic could confuse children are in line with Asaad and Eviatar's (2013) study which found that young children name or sound Arabic letters faster when they do not have physically or phonologically similar letters. However, Asaad and Eviatar (2013) also found that naming or sounding letters which do not exist in the spoken dialect of the children to be the slowest.

Throughout their discussion on the effect of diglossia on literacy, teachers seemed to be mainly focused on the phonological level although even in kindergarten, children are introduced to Arabic letters in short words that consist of three or four letters maximum. Probing the teachers on whether they take the lexical differences between the children's spoken dialect and LA into consideration showed that the prevailing view among them was that if children learn a letter and the sound it represents, they should then be able to identify that letter and sound it out correctly in any word whether or not the word is within their spoken repertoire, and that is applicable to all letters whether or not they represent sounds from their spoken dialect. Teacher 11 indicated:

LA words could be more difficult to understand but not to read. Usually, when a child reads a new LA word, he/she will ask about its meaning and I can give him/her context to understand the meaning of the word. If the child learnt any letter well, he/she would be able to identify it with ease when it is encountered even in LA words new to them.

It is possible that in the currently investigated context, and as was mentioned by the teachers, children experience a very early exposure to LA and come to school with some well-developed LA repertoire, which increases the probability of their familiarity with the short and easy LA words they are introduced to. However, the assumption that the type of word, whether it belongs to the child's spoken dialect or it is a new LA word, should have no effect on the children's phonological analysis ability is not correct. Such an assumption is in sharp contrast to available empirical evidence that shows that children find LA words to be more difficult to analyze, and that they find LA phonemes to be even more difficult when they appear in LA words rather than dialectical words they are already familiar with (Saiegh-Haddad, 2004).

CONCLUSION

The research has investigated how Saudi teachers in kindergarten perceived the effect of diglossia on the acquisition of Arabic literacy and the practices they followed to minimize its effect. Overall, teachers have reflected an awareness of how diglossia could affect literacy and of how this effect would vary across dialects. Teachers also found that the social and linguistic context within which they were teaching granted the children a greater advantage and helped minimize the effect of diglossia, which in turn gave them the opportunity to focus on other orthographic factors that they believed were more critical.

Now, answering the question of how diglossia actually affects children's literacy development in the currently investigated context could benefit from the teachers' reflections but it would certainly require further experimental investigations of children's performance to be affirmatively answered. However, although the effect of diglossia would vary across dialects (Saiegh-Haddad, 2022), that effect, regardless of its size, should always be taken into consideration as long as Arabic literacy is acquired in a diglossic context. A "diglossia-centered" approach is applicable to all linguistic aspects: phonological, morphological, lexical or syntactic (Saiegh-Haddad, 2020, p. 156), which makes it practical to implement across different dialects, with consideration given to how far the dialect is from LA and in what linguistic aspects it mostly differs. For example, prioritizing presenting letters in a way that reduces confusion between physically similar letters, rather than presenting them in a way that reduces the phonological distance between LA and the spoken dialect, does not prevent taking the effect of word type into consideration, and presenting children with words that are available in their spoken dialect before exclusive LA words to make sure that no child is at a diglossic disadvantage. A diglossia-based approach that relies on presenting the familiar first should never be viewed as a competitor to the orthographic-based approach that considers the Arabic orthographic characteristics.

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