Diglossia and Literacy: The Case of the Arab Reader

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Abstract

Using life-history interviews as a method of data collection and NVivo as a data analysis tool, this article presents a case study that focuses on how literacy, mainly reading, is practiced by four Arabic speakers from different parts of the Arab world. The narratives elicited from the interviews paint a picture of the Arab reader as dispassionate, whose exposure to reading rarely goes beyond the walls of the classroom. They attribute this situation partly to the diglossic nature of the Arabic language wherein users are oftentimes more proficient in the regional spoken varieties of the language than they are in Standard Arabic, the language of written discourse. This paper argues that the lack of a "reading culture" in the Arab world is due to an amalgamation of cultural and linguistic factors, among which is diglossia.

Keywords: *Reading, Diglossia, MSA, Arabic, Literacy*

Introduction

Recently, researchers (e.g., Haeri; 2009; Myhill 2014) noticed discrepancies among the literacy reports from various countries in the Arab world. These researchers discovered that the stated literacy rate of a given Arab country varied from one report to the next. Often, the reports contradicted each other. These significant discrepancies drew the validity of the literacy reports into question and attracted the attention of additional researchers (e.g., Sayahi, 2015).

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Despite the newfound attention to literacy, the majority of new research on the topic of literacy acquisition focused on the acquisition of specific grammatical and morphological structures of the Arabic language (e.g., Saiegh-Haddad, 2011). Very little research was conducted to explore the general nature of literacy acquisition in the Arab world (Mayhill, 2014). In an attempt to fill the gap in the existing research, this case study aims to explore the ways in which diglossia along with cultural perceptions of literacy influenced the literacy acquisition of four native Arabic speakers from different parts of the Arab world.

Before discussing diglossia and its influence on literacy acquisition, it is important to define what literacy and diglossia mean in the context of this study. In its simplistic form, literacy can be defined as an individual's ability to read and write in a given language. The validity of this definition has been criticized by many literacy researchers for many reasons, one of which is its inability to account for the level of proficiency that a person must achieve in order to be considered literate (e.g., Dauzat & Dauzat, 1977; Heath, 1980). Instead, researchers have begun to look at literacy on a case-by-case basis, where literacy and what it means to be literate is bound to given societal and cultural contexts (Scribner & Cole, 1981). Thus, if we accept that literacy and what it means to be literate is socially constructed rather than universally identified, then a universal definition of literacy would be more difficult to devise.

In this paper, I define literacy as an individual's ability to read and write in a given language that is in line with the socio-cultural and academic expectations of a given community. I believe this to be a more comprehensive definition of literacy because it goes

beyond the individual's ability to decode a written text to include cultural, historical, and institutional facets that give the literacy act its meaning (Kumagai & Lopez-Sanchez, 2015, p. 1). In addition, literacy practices here refer to any encounter with the written text. This interaction could range from reading a sign on the street to reading a novel. I use diglossia in the classical Fergusonian (1959) sense where it is defined as:

> a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature... which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation (p.16).

Diglossia is seen here as a "characterization of linguistic organization at the socio-cultural level" (Fishman, 1967, p. 34). In Arabic, for example, at least two forms of the language are identified: Classical Arabic (CA), which is known in a more modernized form as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)[2], and Vernacular Arabic (Thompson & Thomas-Ruzic, 1983, p. 609). These two forms, CA/MSA and Vernacular Arabic, are used in different social contexts to serve different sociolinguistic functions.

MSA is both a written and an oral form of Arabic. It is the language of contemporary written discourse and is used among educated speakers to deliver speeches or engage in intellectual conversations. MSA is a slightly modernized version of CA, especially in vocabulary and style. The modernization of Arabic was required with the advancement of

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[2] CA and MSA are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature to represent the high form. However, I will be referring to them as two separate but closely related forms.

technology and the increase in lexis borrowing between languages (Bateson, 2003, p. 90). CA differs largely from MSA in that it is mainly written and has not evolved. It is the language of the Quran and the *Hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet) as well as old literary works. Knowing CA provides language users with access to a wealth of literary culture that goes as far back as to the pre-Islamic era. This classical literature might not be accessible to speakers who only know MSA (Bateson, 2003, p. 79). While CA and MSA differ in lexis, they do share a grammatical system that has remained intact since the 8th Century. Arabic speakers are generally not exposed to MSA/CA until they start formal schooling.

Unlike CA and MSA, Vernacular varieties of Arabic are regional. These regional varieties are the first form of Arabic that native speakers learn, generally through informal social interaction. Vernacular varieties of Arabic are different in grammar, lexis, and phonology from the written varieties; CA and MSA. However, all these varieties share some features that make them mutually intelligible to a certain degree. Vernacular Arabic is used for everyday communication and is acquired with no formal instruction. It is rarely used for formal written interaction.

Context: Diglossia and Literacy Acquisition in the Arab World

Apart from a handful of ethnographic studies by Wagner and colleagues in the 1980s, little research was conducted regarding literacy and its acquisition in the Arab world (Haeri, 2009, p. 417). Recent studies seem to focus more on a specific aspect of language acquisition, for example, children's early acquisition of the phonological and morphological aspects of Arabic (e.g., Saiegh-Haddad, 2011; Saiegh-Haddad, Hadieh & Ravid, 2012) or early literacy

among Arab children in specific areas in the Arab world (e.g., Aram, Korat, Saiegh-Haddad, Arafat, Koury, & Abu Elhija, 2013; Levin, Saiegh-Haddad & Hende, 2008). This recent research of literacy acquisition is important; however, it only provides snapshots of language acquisition at a certain stage in a child's life without much discussion of the role and value of literacy in these Arab communities.

As discussed in the pervious section, reports on literacy rates in the Arab world are problematic due to the questionable data they present. Haeri (2009) argued that the variance between the reported literacy rates of individual countries may differ by "as much as 20 percent" (p. 425). In addition, these reports lacked a clear definition of literacy. When a report did define literacy, it often employed vague terminology such as "adults fifteen years or older who can read and write" (p. 425).

Haeri's concerns were echoed by Myhill (2014) who looked at the most recent 2007-2008 UNESCO data documenting the literacy rates of 180 countries around the world. Only sixteen of the twenty-two Arab countries were represented in this report: Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, UAE, Lebanon, Bahrain, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Oman, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan (Northern Sudan), Yemen, and Morocco. Fourteen out of the sixteen Arab countries included showed "literacy rates that are lower than the average for the 180 countries listed." The two countries rated as being above average, Kuwait and Qatar, "are barely above average" (Myhill, 2014, p. 198). Myhill (2014) took his analysis of the UNESCO report a step further and compared the literacy rates of the sixteen Arab countries with each county's respective Gross Domestic Production (GDP). He hypothesized that the countries

with a high GDP would have a correspondingly high rate of literacy. This, however, was not supported by the data. Instead, Myhill found that there was no correlation between literacy rates and economic wealth in the Arab world. As a result, he argued that low literacy rates could not be explained by poverty or lack of resources. Myhill surmised that the low literacy rates must be the direct result of the diglossic nature of Arabic. This argument is in line with the findings of previous scholarship examining literacy rates in the Arab world. Prior to Myhill's research, Ayari (1996) and Hammoud (2005) both argued that it is diglossia, the discrepancy between the written and spoken forms of Arabic, which is responsible for the high rates of illiteracy in the Arab world.

The first research in literacy acquisition by Arab children was conducted in Morocco in the early 1980's by Wagner and his colleagues. They identified four stages of literacy instruction in Quranic schools that were designed to introduce children to the written form of the language. This methodical progression was believed to facilitate children's success in the first and subsequent grade of formal schooling (for more on Quranic literacy see Wagner and Lotfi, 1980; Wagner, 1982, and Street, 1993).

In the first stage, children are taught the alphabet by chanting the alphabet along with the diacritics that accompany each letter. In the second stage, children start to practice writing by copying words from model texts. At this stage, which might take up to one year, the learner is called *hannash* or "someone who memorizes what is written but cannot read for comprehension" (Wagner & Lotfi, 1980, p. 247). In the third stage, children spend the morning with their teacher reading and reciting different verses from the Quran. In the

afternoon, students join their peers in study groups. The child must have mastered what they had been taught up to this point to progress to the fourth stage. In the fourth and final stage, the child is able to write from dictation.

Typically, children that do not attend Quranic schools are formally introduced to literacy at the age of six when they begin their formal education at public schools. It is there that students are first introduced to Modern Standard Arabic through a variety of reading and writing tasks. All school textbooks are written in MSA, which is remote from the regional varieties that the students use at home (Haeri, 2009). As part of schooling, students "are required to develop concurrently linguistic proficiency and literacy in the non-spoken and largely unfamiliar Standard language" (Saiegh-Haddad & Spolsky, 2014, p. 232). Due to the drastic differences between MSA and Vernacular Arabic, some researchers argue that by the time a child starts school, he/she has already mastered the spoken Arabic variety that is used in their immediate community; their learning of the written form of the language is comparable to learning a second language (Ayari, 1996; Ibrahem, 1982). This gap between school and home literacy practices is exacerbated by the fact that it is unusual for Arab parents to read to their children. Most parents think that because of the diglossic nature of Arabic, their children will not be able to understand the written form of the language at an early age. Because of this, most parents practice oral-folk storytelling (Doak, 1989, cited in Ayari, 2009, p. 249).

Reading, in general, is often viewed as an unenjoyable act in the Arab world. Haeri (2009) examined reports of literacy in Egypt and found that both high school students and

librarians expressed their dislike of reading. Both groups stated, "they find the language of books too difficult and it takes them too long to read just a few pages" (p. 423). This attitude could explain the lack of demand for literature discussed by researchers like Del Castillo. Del Castillo (2001) investigated the low demand for books in the Arab world in relation to the population size in the area. He states that "there are 275 million Arab speakers in 22 countries, but for Middle Eastern publishers, print runs of 5,000 are considered huge…a best seller in Egypt is a book that reaches just 10,000 copies sold, a tenth of what a best seller in the United States might do. Only a few books make it into the stratosphere of 50,000 or more copies" (p. 55. cited in Haeri, 2009, p. 424).

This combination of late exposure and negative attitude towards the written form of the language seem to widen the gap between the written and the spoken varieties, thus making the acquisition of literacy more challenging.

Method

This case study uses oral life-story interviews (e.g., Bell, 1995, 2002, 2011) to explore the literacy practices of four native Arabic speakers representing Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. Following common interviewing guidelines (Anderson & Killenberg, 2008; Atkinson, 2002; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Spradley, 1979) all participants were interviewed for 45-90 minutes, with three interviews being conducted in person and one via Skype. All interviews were audio recorded. The subjects were given the option to use Arabic or English during the interview to accommodate their linguistic needs. The subjects were also

encouraged to code-switch between Arabic and English if they felt the need to do so. All

participants chose to use English primarily, but code-switched to Arabic on a few occasions.

There were three female participants and one male, all born in their home countries

between 1978 and 1986. At the time of this study, three participants were working on their

PhDs and one on her second MSc. All participants were residing in the U.S. except for one

who was residing in Malaysia.

Table 1
Participants' Demographic Information

Name (pseudonym)	Year of Birth	Country of Origin	Gender	Highest Degree Earned	Profession	Mother's education	Mother's profession	Father's education	Father's profession
Basma	1986	Kuwait	F	MSc	Student	High school diploma	Teacher (home economics)	Middle school diploma	Retired
Nasir	1979	Saudi Arabia	M	MA	Teaching assistant	Semi-illiterate	Housewife	High school diploma	Truck Driver
Shayma	1978	Yemen	F	MA	Research assistant	Middle school diploma	Housewife	MA (Arabic literature) PhD (Modern History)	College Professor
Summer	1978	Jordan	F	MA	Teaching assistant	High school diploma	Housewife	MA (engineering)	Retired

The main sources of data for this project are the narratives elicited from the interviews.

After the interviews were conducted, all audio files were uploaded, transcribed, and then

coded using *NVivo*. The data was transcribed using a full-broad transcription technique

(Revesz, 2011), where little attention was paid to details (e.g., tone, length of pauses, rising

intonation, etc.). All interviews were transcribed into English. Arabic words that the

participants code-switched to were transliterated, and the English equivalent was provided

next to them. Aside from omitting false starts, no other modifications were made to the

original responses.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. Where were the participants initially socialized into literacy practices in Arabic?

2. How were the participants introduced to literacy practices at school? And in what way did home literacy impact school literacy practices?

3. What impact, if any, does diglossia have on the participants' acquisition of reading?

Results and Discussion

All participants identified the spoken variety of Arabic used in their local community as their native language. The participants' early encounters with literacy varied. For example, some were exposed to the tradition of storytelling while others were not. However, their overall experiences seem to have been greatly influenced by their parents' level of schooling as well as the Arabic-language pedagogy practiced at school. This section will attempt to answer the previously stated research questions based on the participants' experiences.

1. Where were the participants initially socialized into literacy practices in Arabic?

Basma. Basma is the participant from Kuwait. At the time of the interview, she was working on a graduate degree in engineering. She spoke fondly of her literacy practices and how much she enjoys writing her diaries in Arabic. Her first encounter with literacy began at an early age with her maternal grandmother telling her stories: "my grandmother liked telling me a story" (I1, R1). Around the same time, she also remembers her father telling her religious stories: "I remember, my father he is telling me qesas al'anbeya' *(stories of the Prophets)"* (I1, R6).

Her grandmother's stories were folkloric in nature. These stories followed the oral tradition of storytelling and focused on passing along community traditions and wisdom from one generation to the next. Since these stories are mostly oral, the storytellers might embellish some of the details to fit the larger purpose behind the story. For example, if the storyteller wished to emphasize the importance of respecting the elderly, she would exaggerate that part of the story. In addition to these folk stories, Basma's father told her religious stories meant to instill religious values in children at an early age. Basma was also exposed to non-religious chants that are considered more entertaining for children than regular storytelling.

Basma's siblings also contributed to maintaining the tradition of storytelling. She recalled: "I remember my sister telling me a story, but I don't remember someone reading a story for me…" (I1, R3). In Basma's experience, there was a great emphasis on oral tradition that was echoed by other participants.

Nasir. Nasir is from Saudi Arabia. His early exposure to literacy began in the form of storytelling. However, his experience with storytelling was sporadic and less systematic. As he reflected on the infrequency of storytelling during his childhood, he reasoned that it was not highly valued in his community. His experience with storytelling was not done individually but in a group during family gatherings. Here is how he elaborated on this experience:

As I said, it is not part of the culture, or at least where I lived or at least in my family context, but I know that my friends are the same, but I'm not sure if it is to a more educated families where parents have graduate or undergraduate degrees that they are doing things like this. My parents didn't do it. And I was actually fond of...or probably because I wasn't exposed to, I wasn't actually interested in listening to stories. Stories might be told, but it was not intended at a certain time. It might be told incidentally where there is a family gathering, but it was not intended for me, as a child to listen to a story and learn from it or at least entertained by (I3, R2).

During family gatherings, these stories are usually told by an elder to a group of children who sit in a circle around the storyteller. The children are expected to sit quietly and listen and learn from the storyteller's wisdom. They are also expected not to interrupt with questions unless they were asked. The lack of the routine storytelling in Nasir's childhood could be linked to his parents' background. Nasir's father, the head of the household, worked long hours to provide for his family. His profession required him to be away from home for extended periods of time. As such, he was predominantly absent from the family's day-to-day routine. Nasir's mother, who is functionally illiterate, was the main caretaker of Nasir and his siblings. Maintaining the home and caring for her children left her little time for story-telling.

Summer. Growing up in Jordan, there were a number of factors that positively influenced Summer's early exposure to literacy; mainly television and her older sister. Most children in the Arab world who do not go to Quranic Schools are initially exposed to Modern Standard Arabic through television. In addition to cartoons that are broadcast in Standard Arabic,

there are a number of educational shows like *Eftah Ya Simsim*, the Arabic version of *Sesame Street*, that are designed to introduce children to Standard Arabic at an early age. As a child, Summer watched these shows regularly. Her early exposure to Standard Arabic made her experience with storytelling a little different from that of the other participants. Prior to joining school, she recalled being able to understand stories that her older sister read to her in MSA with no need for interpretation into the spoken Jordanian-Arabic:

> S: No need for explanation because we were hooked to the TV whenever we had those kid
>
> shows, so it was easy for me to understand Standard Arabic. Yeah, she used to read books
>
> in Standard Arabic, and no explanation was required (I4, R1).

Even though Summer's experience with storytelling took place in Standard Arabic, her exposure to that form of the language remained primarily oral as she was not yet able to read in MSA. Similar to Nasir's experience, Summer's storytelling routine was also infrequent. She seemed to rely heavily on television as her main source of Standard Arabic.

Shayma. Born and raised in Yemen, Shayma was also exposed to literacy through educational children's television shows where Standard Arabic was widely used. In addition to television, she was exposed to the tradition of oral storytelling as a child. Her grandmother and mother were the main storytellers:

> Sh: It was my mom and my grandma. My dad was always busy. (I5, R5).
>
> G: Do you remember your parents, for example, reading to you when you were
>
> little? Or before school? Or telling you stories?

Sh: Yes, stories, but it will not be in formal Arabic. It will be in Colloquial

Arabic.

Like, in our dialect. It was just like grandma stories (laughter). (I5, R, 3)

Shayma recalled her father, an intellectual who held a PhD in history, being constantly too

busy to sit down and read to her or tell her stories. Despite his absence, he instilled in her

his love for reading at an early age; she cherishes this to this day.

 All participants were exposed to the tradition of oral storytelling in their spoken

variety, even though the frequency varied among them. The majority of the stories were

told to each participant in their spoken variety. Standard Arabic was used for the purpose

of storytelling with only one participant. The participants' experiences with storytelling

corroborates existing literature that states that the majority of Arab parents resort to oral-

folk stories due to the difficulties their children might face when trying to understand the

written form (Doak, 1989, cited in Ayari, 2009, p. 249).

As the excerpts above show, some of the participants were exposed to an oral version

of MSA through cartoons prior to joining school. Because none of the female participants

attended a Quranic school prior to starting their formal education, television was their first

and only source of exposure to MSA. Summer mentioned:

My only source of Standard Arabic knowledge was, as I told you, television

shows and that kind of stuff and the situation wasn't as it is today. We

watched television every day for only a couple of hours, or probably three

hours at the most. So, there wasn't that much exposure to Standard Arabic (I4,

R3)

All female participants valued television as a method of exposing children to MSA.

Perhaps in correlation, only the female participants credited television programs as being

their introduction to MSA. This is likely due to the conservative nature of Arabic culture; it

is much more socially acceptable for boys to play outside than girls. As such, young girls

spend more time indoors and often turn to television for entertainment.

In Summer's experience, early exposure to MSA through television facilitated her

ability to understand stories that were read to her in MSA. For Basma, it was cartoons that

made her aware of the different forms of Arabic at an early age. All of the female

participants credited such shows in developing children's linguistic abilities early on, and

to some extent preparing them for school. Shayma recalled how her daughter, who was

influenced by cartoons, used to speak in MSA. This is something never practiced for

everyday communication:

> The television and the cartoons, they are amazing. Because as I told you, my
>
> little daughter, she was three-years-old and she was speaking in formal
>
> Arabic. It was so funny. Everyone was laughing because that was so cute.
>
> She will be like umee, umee, haya ela alghada' *(mom, mom, let's go have lunch)*
>
> (laughter) (I5, R3).

She then reflected on her own experience:

Most of the television shows when we were children were in formal Arabic

for kids, if you remember [laughter]. That also strengthened my Arabic

language. You know Eftah Ya Simsim *(Sesame Street)*? All the cartoons were

in very good formal Arabic that helped me more than school (laughter) (I5,

R1).

Presently, the use of MSA in cartoons is still common though it is not as prevalent as

it once was. This is largely due to advancements in telecommunications technology that

make it possible to easily and cheaply translate and dub the programs' spoken dialogue

into the regional variety of the target population. This practice is especially common with

foreign-made programming.

Nasir's experience with MSA was different from that of the female participants.

While his family did introduce him to the alphabet just prior to the start of his formal

education,

Nasir first encountered CA and MSA in Quranic School. He did not recall being exposed to

MSA through television as a child. Among all the participants' experiences, Nasir's course

of literacy acquisition was the only one that followed the traditional path of language

acquisition reported in previous research (Wagner & Lotfi, 1980; Wagner, 1982; Wagner,

Messick, & Spratt, 1986; see previous section). Nasir grew up in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace

of Islam, where *kuttabs* or Quranic schools originated. This, and his sex, may explain why

his path to language acquisition differed from that of the other participants.

Nasir was exposed to a method of instruction in Quranic School that followed the same teaching patterns that Wagner and Lotfi (1980) had reported. The teachers in his school employed a very traditional method of instruction involving repetition that they used to introduce him to verses of the Quran through recitation, and eventually to the Quranic script through reading and writing. In this method of instruction, repetition is initially used orally to develop a habit and aid with memorization. The memorization process began with a small verse, and after the children showed mastery of it, they were introduced to the next verse. After they mastered the first two verses, they would start from the beginning and recite both verses and so on, until they memorize a full Surah, i.e. a chapter of the Quran. The process would continue until the children memorized major parts of the Quran or the whole Book, depending on how long they stayed in Quranic schools. At a later stage in the acquisition process, a teacher would read individual words and sentences aloud from the Quranic script. The students would parrot what the teacher was saying while following along in the Book. Through this, students would improve written word recognition and pronunciation. Repetitively copying written words by hand was used to improve children's handwriting.

While Nasir joined a Quranic school at an early age, Summer and Basma did not join a Quranic school until well after they had begun their formal schooling. They were in the fourth and fifth grades respectively. Here is how they recalled their experiences with memorization at Quranic Schools:

S: It was a memorization program, and we used to recite in class, repeating. Although we were able to read and write at that stage, we depended more on rote memorization, so the teacher was saying the verses, and we used to repeat after her until we memorized. Sometimes later on when I looked at the Quran and read the verses, it was quite strange for me that I...for example, if you ask me how many verses are there in the surah, maybe I couldn't tell, or I could tell wrongly, because it is based on the pauses that we have rather than just knowing how many aayas *(verses)*. It was based on recitation rather than reading, yeah. Although, I was able to read at that age.

G: But the teacher did not actually look at the Quran itself as you were reading or were you just following or was it just all oral...

S: We did have that as the first reading, but then we were required to close it and just listen to her. We wanted to follow ahkam altajweed *(rules governing correct pronunciation of the Quran)*, you know (I4, R5)

B: I did tahfeed *(memorization)* Quran and also tajweed *(rules governing correct pronunciation of the Quran)*. In the summer, for like one month. Maybe I went there for two years, but only for the summer. Once was at the mosque, maybe that was at the fourth grade. We have to hefiz jozo' amma *(a specific part of the Quran)*. So, it was like more the teacher would sit with four to five kids in halaqa *(circle)* and tried to talqeen *(teach the recitation of)* the Qur'an.

G: So it was like, repeat after me kind of thing?

B: Yeah, and then we have to read in order to memorize, then later at the end of

the month lazem yseer tasmee' *(there must be recitation)* and also at home you

still need to read the Quran to practice.

G: So, at the mosque the person who was teaching you, did they read the

Quran as they read? Did they explain things or was it more like memorization?

Did they tell you what the surah say?

B: Yeah, they tell us what's the meaning of the Surah. (I1, R2).

The excerpts above show some variation among the participants' experiences in

Quranic Schools. For Summer, reading the original text was done only during the first stage

of teaching, while for Basma, the teacher relied heavily on the written text throughout the

memorization process. For the participants, writing and reading in the sense of connecting

sounds to written letters played a very minimal role in a Quranic school. Despite the

difference in methods used across Quranic schools, the ultimate goal was to help children

memorize the Quran and internalizing the proper conventions governing the reading of the

Quran. Literacy in itself was a byproduct, not the goal.

2. *How were the participants introduced to literacy practices at school? And in what way*
   did home literacy impact school literacy practices?

This section traces the participants' development of literacy at school. All participants

began their formal schooling at the age of six and attended public schools in their respective

countries. All stated that their textbooks were published in Modern Standard Arabic. While

their teachers would occasionally use MSA to present their lesson, they mainly used Vernacular Arabic as the medium of instruction. Only the Arabic-language teachers used MSA regularly though they would sometimes revert to Vernacular Arabic to facilitate understanding of difficult material.

In Arab public schools, the Arabic language is taught throughout all grade levels, similar to English courses in US schools. Arabic language instruction is usually divided into: mahfodat *memorization,* Ta'beer *composition*, emla' *dictation*, naho *grammar*, and mutala'a *reading.* For the memorization section, the students mainly memorize poems that were written by well-known Arab poets or chants that are either national or religious in nature. For example, Shayma's memorization section of her Arabic class focused primarily on memorizing poetry. The memorized material is sometimes recited orally, other times the students are required to reproduce it in writing.

All participants' narratives show that reading was viewed more as a stepping stone that led to writing than a skill that was worth developing in and of itself. This finding supports Ibraham's (1982) research which argued that in the Arab world, reading and writing skills are considered interconnected as learning to read will, by extension, lead to better writing skills. Unsurprisingly then, reading and writing were always tied together in the experience of the female students. In the classroom, a reading task would be followed with a corresponding writing task. To expose students to a style of writing or genre of literature, teachers would present that style or genre as a reading assignment. Students were not given a formal breakdown of the text's structure or an explanation of why the text

was composed as it was. Rather, students were expected to use the text as a blueprint for writing in that genre or style. They would complete a writing assignment, writing in a way that mimicked the text. Other times, the reading task would be followed by a writing task in the form of answering a list of reading-comprehension questions. None of the female participants recalled being taught effective reading techniques.

Nasir's instruction in reading was more sophisticated. He was the only participant to be taught effective reading strategies and composition techniques. His early reading and literature classes exposed him to a number of genres such as prose, poetry, and oratory. In high school, he was introduced to Arabic novels, short stories, and plays. Nasir argued that the explicit reading instruction he received and his exposure to a broad variety of literature were beneficial in improving his reading comprehension and in indirectly developing his writing skills in Arabic composition classes. He believes that the strong focus on reading throughout his schooling was politically motivated, not to improve the students' reading skills. Nasir's response was:

> Reading, it was more systematic. This course was always there. It was meant
>
> to…ideologically…it was meant to enhance nationalism. They would talk
>
> about topics about how Saudi Arabia was unified and how it, basically, came
>
> into existence and what happened there and what happened. (I3, R2).

A sense of the participants' literacy development and acquisition would not be complete without considering their literacy practices at home. Most of the participants were exposed to, or prepared for, literacy through educational cartoons and children's books at

an early age. However, their home practices became an extension of their academic literacy development as they grew older. Such practical literacy development took the form of homework assignments. It was uncommon for the participants' parents to help their children with homework. The task was usually diverted to an older sibling. This was due to the fact that the parents were either uneducated or were too busy working to provide for their families. For Nasir, both factors played a role in his home literacy. His father worked long hours and his mother, who cared for him and his siblings, was illiterate. As a result, most of his home literacy centered around doing homework with the help of his older siblings.

Summer's experience echoed that of Nasir's. Beyond school-related work, she stated, there was no parental encouragement for literacy development at home: "Although we did read and write and there is interest in reading, when you come back home, is not that nourished and encouraged by parents" (I4, R1).

On the other hand, Shayma, whose father held the highest degree among all participants' parents, recalled her father buying her children's books when she was eight-years old: "I particularly remember that my father used to buy me a lot of stories. Like, for kids in Arabic and I was…My sister helped me read them." (I5, R1). However, her father was not around to actually help her read these books, so her sister filled in his place.

As this section has shown, the participants' home literacy practices and development took the form of homework; there was no reading or writing for the sake of it. In addition,

the education level of the participants' parents, in addition to diglossia, made self-sought

literacy development outside of school more challenging.

3. *What impact, if any, does diglossia have on the participants' acquisition of reading?*

To answer this question, this section will look at the participants' own reflection on Arabic

as a diglossic language. When responding to this issue, the participants drew a clear

distinction between two issues: how literacy was practiced around them and how this

practice, coupled with diglossia, impacted their own literacy practices.

Despite the participants' exposure to literacy at school and the existence of written

texts at home, such as books and newspapers, the majority of the participants expressed

lack of encouragement towards developing literacy skills beyond what was necessary to

achieve good grades. Across their experiences, the participants attributed this lack of

encouragement not only to their immediate community, but to the Arab culture at large.

Even the participants who were encouraged at home lacked good examples to follow in

their communities:

> We don't have that reading culture back home. So, the only thing that I can tell
>
> you is that (laughter) I practiced reading and writing just for school
>
> requirements. Not for fun, not that I wanted to read children's books. I did so,

but this happened probably once every three months or so. It wasn't a routine

that I do every day, but it was rather, reading in school, coming back home

doing the homework, and that's it (Summer, I4, R1).

As the excerpt above shows, the lack of value attributed to literacy in Summer's

immediate community in addition to the limited exposure to Standard Arabic outside of

school, seem to have had an impact on the value she ascribed to her own literacy practices

in Arabic.

Even though it was expressed differently by different participants, their observations

of their communities' indifference towards the development of literacy played an

undeniable role in their own attitudes regarding literacy acquisition and development.

Basma, for example, shared that her mother's attempt to foster her literacy outside of school

by taking her to annual book fairs. Basma felt her encouragement as insincere, simply

because the mother, herself did not read at home.

B: I think, like, my mom encourages us to go to ma'rad alketaab *(the book fair)* to

pick a story. I don't think she follows what she advises. My mother and father

don't read a lot, or my father has a library. It is more like religion things, not

like you know. So, my mom encourages us to read at an early age, to pick

stories, read stories (Basma, I1, R1).

The majority of the participants expressed difficulty and a lack of confidence when

using MSA to express their thoughts, either in writing or orally. They simply lack a high

level of proficiency in those forms. This lack of confidence was readily apparent in some of

the participants' responses when their class assignments required them to produce MSA in the form of written composition. Summer recalled her struggles to response to a writing prompt in MSA:

> I did have ideas, but it was hard for me to express them, because my only source of Standard Arabic knowledge was, as I told you, television shows and that kind of stuff and the situation wasn't… This is something that made me sometimes feel frustrated and felt like I didn't do well enough. Not because I did not want to write on this topic, or I didn't like it. It's rather because I didn't receive the quality of education required for this (I4, R2).

The excerpt above shows that lack of proficiency in MSA impeded Summer's ability to write in Arabic. Despite the fact that she had the ideas to write on a given topic, she was not able to translate her ideas into a linguistic code that was acceptable in a classroom setting. Her frustration with MSA, however, did not stop her from writing outside of school. Summer kept a diary where she used a blend of MSA and Jordanian Arabic whenever MSA failed her. She also shared that she knew quite well that such a mix between linguistic forms was not an acceptable form of written discourse. As a result, she kept her diary to herself.

Conclusion

As the participants reflected on their experiences with literacy, they shared some insightful views about how diglossia, as well as their immediate communities, impacted their personal journeys with literacy acquisition. This was evidenced by the participants' limited

exposure to MSA. Even school did not provide a full exposure to this form of Arabic as the majority of teachers used Vernacular Arabic to deliver their lessons, with the exception of their Arabic teachers who used MSA, with occasional code-switches to Vernacular Arabic. This lack of prolonged exposure to MSA had a negative impact on the amount of reading they practiced outside of school, which in turn impacted their confidence as language users.

Given the oral nature of Arab culture, it was not surprising for the participants to be first exposed to literacy through tradition of oral storytelling with no consistent exposure to written Arabic. This was apparent not only in the way the participants reflected on their own literacy practices, but also on the practices of those around them. Even though early exposure to MSA through TV and at school was beneficial for participants like Summer, there was a general disconnect between what was emphasized at school and what was practiced at home. This is also true for Nasir who was exposed to Quranic Arabic at an early age, who found such exposure helpful for his development as a reader, but not as a writer. All of the participants' inability to express themselves in MSA as opposed to reading, could be attributed to the simple fact that reading is a receptive skill that is more difficult to measure when compared to writing.

This study attempted to present the complex phenomenon of diglossia in the Arab world through the eyes of Arabic-language speakers. It also presented how cultural and linguistic factors are impeding literacy acquisition. Further research is needed to account for the influence of diglossia on literacy.

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