

The Influence of Kindergarten in Overcoming Diglossia among Primary School Pupils in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Does diglossia, a natural linguistic phenomenon, present extraordinary challenges to children that are just starting school? The form of Arabic a child has to use in school is not usually the form that he/she uses at home. In school, books are written in standard Arabic, but at home the form used is typically a local dialect. Does this switch impede knowledge acquisition? In kindergarten, children encounter standard Arabic for the first time, and it is during this stage of a child's education that he/she is prepared for primary school. This study examines the benefits derived from language learning in kindergarten to overcome diglossia among first-grade Arab primary school pupils. I examine whether the year a child spends in kindergarten helps him/her to overcome diglossia during the first year in primary school. A sample of 101 female pupils (ages 6-7) was randomly selected from the first grades of five primary schools in Al-Ahsa, Saudi Arabia. They were divided into two groups: the first subsample included pupils who had attended kindergarten for at least one year before primary school, while the second subsample included pupils that had not attended kindergarten before starting primary school. The results show that there was no significant difference found between the mean scores of children who attended and those who did not attend kindergarten in all four dimensions of the presented diglossia test and in the total score. In summary, children show a similar level of diglossia regardless of whether they attend kindergarten before starting primary school.

Keywords: Diglossia, Arabic, kindergarten, Saudi Arabia, education.

Introduction

Diglossia could be a troubling phenomenon, especially among children starting primary school. Arab children spend their early age at home using their parent's dialect which can be different from the variety he finds at schools where teachers are, supposedly, using standard Arabic to deliver lessons. Knowledge is usually acquired through language, thus, when language skills are developed, children will acquire the knowledge easily and quickly.

Diglossia refers to the existence of two varieties of the same language used in different fields and functions (Ferguson, 1959). It can be summarized as the phenomenon through which the same language is presented in two forms. One form is considered to be more prestigious, such as the language used in literary works, lectures, and religious lectures. By contrast, the second form is considered to be simple, and it is typically composed of the colloquial dialects spoken among community members in their daily lives (at home, in the market, etc.). As many scholars have already noted, this simultaneous presence of standard and colloquial Arabic is found throughout the Arab world. Traditionally, there has consistently been a call to implement the use of standard Arabic in all situations, especially by educators; however, opponents claim that local dialects are easier for speakers to use, and that therefore countries should adopt local dialects as national languages (e.g., Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese, etc.). Such supporters of divergent Arabic consequently renounce the standard language and consider it to be archaic and, at least to some degree, worthless (Al-Mousa, 1987; Anis, 1990; Cote, 2009). Diglossia has not been occurred in Egypt, Morocco, or Syria, mainly because the Arabic language has just recently been introduced in these countries (Al-Mousa, 1987; Anis, 1990). Diglossia is, however, found on the Arabian Peninsula, a region whose people use only Arabic. For example, Al-Azraqi (2005) discusses the general trend towards the pervasiveness of diglossia in Saudi society, particularly in Al-Ahsa in the east of the country (the context of the present study), and notes its widespread acceptance by local communities. Indeed, 86% of the participants routinely use a colloquial dialect when speaking within the family. Although this study identifies and explicates the case of diglossia, it does not suggest methods for overcoming the challenges that this linguistic phenomenon poses among speakers.

Some studies have found that diglossia adversely affects Arabic language acquisition. According to Ayari (1996), diglossia hinders Arab children from acquiring reading skills because first-grade pupils are asked to study in standard Arabic, which differs from the colloquial language used at home. Ayari concludes that Arab children do not use the standard language before starting school, suggesting that children in the first grade view standard Arabic as a quasi-second language. What this means, then, is that children are required to read and write in two languages simultaneously. But Ayari adds that early exposure to the standard language during pre-school helps children overcome this problem. Haddad (2004) also confirms that the huge gap between dialectical and standard Arabic adversely affects melodic awareness and reading and writing skills, especially for children who face difficulties reading and writing in general.

Building from Ayari and Haddad, the present study examines the benefits derived from language learning in kindergarten (for children aged 4 to 6 years) to overcome diglossia among first-grade primary school pupils. The findings of this study contribute to the body of knowledge on this topic for the following three reasons. First, they guide educators on the importance of teaching solid linguistic skills to kindergarten children in order to facilitate children's language transition. Second, they help families recognize the potentially negative educational impact of

using a local dialect at home. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these findings call attention to the importance

Language Acquisition and the Importance of Kindergarten

Researchers have examined the necessary platforms of a child's development and growth, including language development. Language is the essence of mental processes and the most complex aspect acquired by humans. Although previous evidence on the way children acquire language is inconclusive, a number of theories have been proposed to explain it, including behavioral theory, innate theory, and knowledge theory (see Skinner, 1957; Chomsky, 1959; Lenneberg, 1964, 1967; Reutzel, 1997).

Lenneberg (1967) finds that the ability of a child to acquire language diminishes after the age of six. At this point, brain programming changes in biological terms from language learning to knowledge learning. The author also states that maturational constraints restrict the time within which a first language can be acquired. Because first-language acquisition relies on neuroplasticity, if language acquisition does not occur by puberty, full mastery cannot be achieved. This is known as the "critical period hypothesis". The critical period hypothesis was developed further by Pinker (1994), who proposed that language acquisition is certain during childhood, gradually endangered until puberty ends, and is doubtful thereafter.

This theory has often been extended to a critical period for second-language acquisition, although this is much less widely accepted, see Singleton and Lengyel (1995) While the window for learning a second language never completely closes, certain linguistic characteristics seem more affected by the age of the learner than others. For example, adult second-language learners nearly always retain an immediately identifiable foreign accent, including some who display perfect grammar (Oyama, 1976). Some writers have suggested a younger critical age for learning phonology than for syntax.

The difficulty faced by Arab children in relation to diglossia is that they are not regularly exposed to standard Arabic; instead, they acquire and use the local dialect until the age of 5 or 6. This might cause difficulty for them when they start school. If Arab children cannot overcome this difficulty before the age of six, learning standard Arabic will become equivalent to learning a second language, rather than being considered the acquisition of the mother tongue. In Saudi Arabia, where compulsory education for a child begins at six, it is no overstatement to say that the child would find difficulty in absorbing much of the standard vocabulary and structures, which, in turn, could delay the acquisition of knowledge. Although linguists and educators are aware of this issue, they are trapped in the dilemma of finding a solution to the linguistic dimension faced by Arab children when starting school. Learning a language after the age of six requires greater effort by the child because the process at this stage is considered to be learning rather than acquisition (Al-Qasimi, 2007).

History of Kindergartens in Saudi Arabia

Before discussing the role of kindergartens in Saudi Arabia, we should first refer to the definition of kindergartens and their history around the world. Froebel established his Play and Activity Institute in 1837 in Germany, which he termed "kindergarten" in 1840. From that point onwards, kindergartens spread to surrounding countries and then across Europe and around the world. For instance, in the United States, the first kindergarten was established in 1855 in Watertown, Massachusetts, and the concept spread quickly, reaching 4500 establishments by 1900 (Faraj, 2009).

Al-Ghamdi & Abdul Jawad (2005) confirms that kindergartens in Saudi Arabia, as in many other countries around the world, are not considered to be part of the formal education hierarchy, although they are administered by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Services. In other words, education is voluntary and not necessary for a child's passage into the first year of primary school.

The private sector in Saudi Arabia was the first to focus on establishing kindergartens, and was solely responsible for the kindergartens in Saudi Arabia until 1385 H/1966, when the Ministry of Education assumed responsibility for them. The Ministry opened kindergartens in Riyadh in 1386 H/1967, followed by two kindergartens in the Eastern Province the following year. In 1399/1979, the Ministry of Education formulated a set of educational objectives to be reached in kindergarten. Although still not mandatory, the importance and necessity of this stage were thus further underlined (Faraj, 2009). It also continued to strengthen this private-public partnership until 1400 H/ 1980, when it was announced that all kindergartens would be affiliated to the General Presidency for Girls' Education, which aimed to establish 350 kindergartens by 1424 H/2004. (Al-Ghamdi & Abdul Jawad, 2005; Faraj, 2009).

From 1423 H/2003, 211 kindergartens were affiliated with the Cooperation Department in the Ministry of Social Affairs, while the Ministry of Defense and Aviation supervised eight kindergartens affiliated with schools for their employees. The National Guard also oversaw twelve subsidiary kindergartens. Moreover, the statistics from 1425–1426 H/ 2005-2006 indicates that the overall number of kindergartens in Saudi Arabia had reached 1320 (Faraj, 2009).

Although the curricula used in kindergartens differ by country, the fundamental principle of education is usually through games, activities, songs, and stories, because playing is as essential for a child as sleeping and eating. The current curriculum in kindergartens in Saudi Arabia is based on so-called educational units. It has passed through many stages, beginning with teachers' and supervisors' efforts when shaping the formation of the first kindergartens and ending with the development of the current curriculum on which the Presidency for Girls' Education has been working since 1408 H/1987, which focuses specifically on self-learning (Faraj, 2009).

Literature Review

Among the studies to have examined the effect of diglossia on the acquisition of language skills in the Arab world, the seminal work by Haddad (2003, 2004, 2005, 2007) and Haddad and Levina (2008) in local schools in Palestine studied the contrast between the use of standard and dialectical language and assessed its impact on pupils' language acquisition. The authors concluded that this linguistic dimension results in a difficulty in language learning and acquisition. The study by Ayari (1996) goes further by linking diglossia in the Arab community with illiteracy, which, according to a 1985 UNESCO report, reached 56.5% in the Arab world. Likewise, Maamouri (1998) reports the serious lack of linguistic competency in the Arab world and its negative impact on educational attainment and societal progress. The author stresses the need to develop a linguistic plan to overcome this difficulty and thus improve standards of education and living. Al-Dannan (2000) attempts to help to resolve this dilemma. Indeed, his project to encourage the use of standard Arabic in kindergartens in Kuwait, Syria, and other Arab countries led to a successful result (Al-Dannan, 2000).

Mohammed's (2006) study examines the relationship between the lack of certain pre-academic skills in kindergarten children (e.g., identifying numbers, letters, shapes, and colours,

as well as awareness or phonological perception) and their willingness to attend school. The study finds a positive relationship between pre-academic skills and willingness to attend school. Moreover, the ability of kindergarten children to identify letters, numbers, and shapes serves as the best predictor of school readiness.

Similarly, Isabella et al. (1998) note the importance of providing young children with verbal, language, cognitive, sensory, and mental signals. They find that linguistic development is directly proportional to the mother's attachment behaviours as represented by speech and understanding, and to her behaviour in referring to and naming things and asking the child what he/she knows, leading to the development of the child's discussion, exploration, signaling, and simulation competences.

Al-Qasimi (2007) believes that that the means of communication can play a significant and positive role in a preschool-aged child's standard Arabic language acquisition; television, for example, where programs may be broadcast in standard Arabic rather than the local dialect. Moreover, after starting school, children should continue to be encouraged in different ways to speak standard Arabic in order to build on what they have already learned.

Education policymakers in the Arab world must recognize the importance of language learning at the kindergarten stage, however. Kindergartens can support the child linguistically, in preparation for the transition to primary school.

The Present Study

As mentioned earlier, the present study examines whether the year that the child spends in the kindergarten benefits him/her to overcome diglossia. Based on the foregoing, A test was formulated to test the following two hypotheses in the present study:

H1: Diglossia is demonstrated among first-grade primary school pupils.

H2: There is a relationship between the degree of diglossia and attendance at kindergarten.

Methodology

A sample of 101 female pupils (aged between 6 and 7 years) was randomly selected from the first grades of several primary schools. The sample was divided into two groups. The first subsample included pupils who had attended kindergarten for at least one year before the primary grade, while the second subsample included pupils that had not attended kindergarten before starting school. The following five kindergartens in Al-Ahsa were used: Al-Tuwaitheer Modern Kindergarten, Al Taraf Kindergarten, Al Kifah Kindergarten, Al Anjal Kindergarten, and the Fifth Kindergarten in Hofuf. These kindergartens were representative of the different social, economic, and cultural levels in the study region.

The participants were not subjected to any kind of training. Further, children were not forced to adhere to any linguistic program, and only the usual program approved by the Ministry of Education for the kindergarten stage was used. In the next step, an IQ test prepared by Sara (1988) was applied to ensure that the sample was devoid of any individual below the normal level of intelligence. Basic information was then collected about the pupils' social lives and family backgrounds to ensure the representativeness of the sample¹.

For data collection, I relied on the personal observations of participants when carrying out the diglossia test. The diglossia test was composed of three parts: (a) naming objects, (b) articulating sounds, and (c) narrating (which included ordering images and forming sentences).

¹ The researcher is indebted for Dr. Safa Al-Buhairy and her fieldworkers for their efforts and cooperation during the collection of the data and for her suggestions and help in putting the tests.

In this test, linguistic differences between the two subsamples were noted when pronouncing certain language sounds and using nouns incompatible with the standard language. The formulation of this test relied on the findings of Al-Azraqi (2005), Haddad (2003, 2004, 2005, 2007), Maamouri (1998), and Ayari (1996).

After testing the study sample for the first time, the diglossia test was modified to alter certain ambiguous images and retested using the same participants two weeks after the first application. Table 1 shows the correlation coefficients between the first and second applications. These correlation coefficients were based on each test score and the total score for the dimension to which that question belonged.

Table 1. Correlation coefficients between the first and second applications of the diglossia test

Test	Correlation coefficient
Naming objects	0.678
Articulating sounds	0.703
Ordering images	0.659
Forming sentences	0.685
Overall	0.736

The correlation coefficients between the first and second applications were significant at the 1% level, confirming the stability of the test. The correlation coefficients between each dimension of the scale and the total scale score were also calculated for the first subsample only, and ranged between 0.391 and 0.584 at the 1% significance level.

Results

To test H1, the means, standard deviations (SDs), and percentages for the responses to the diglossia test were calculated, as presented in Table 2. To calculate the percentage, the mean score was divided by the maximum score for that dimension.

Table 2. Responses to the diglossia test by participants

Test	Maximum score	Mean	SD	Percentage
Naming objects	24	7.3	2.629	30.4%
Articulating sounds	14	8.19	3.005	58.5%
Ordering images	5	1.49	1.292	29.8%
Forming sentences	15	3.33	2.813	22.2%
Total	58	20.32	6.747	35%

Table 2 shows that the percentage of responses to all parts of the test was very low, ranging between 22.2% and 30.4%. Likewise, the response to the scale as a whole was only 35%, suggesting that the majority of the children sampled exhibit diglossia, except for the articulating sounds dimension (58.5%).

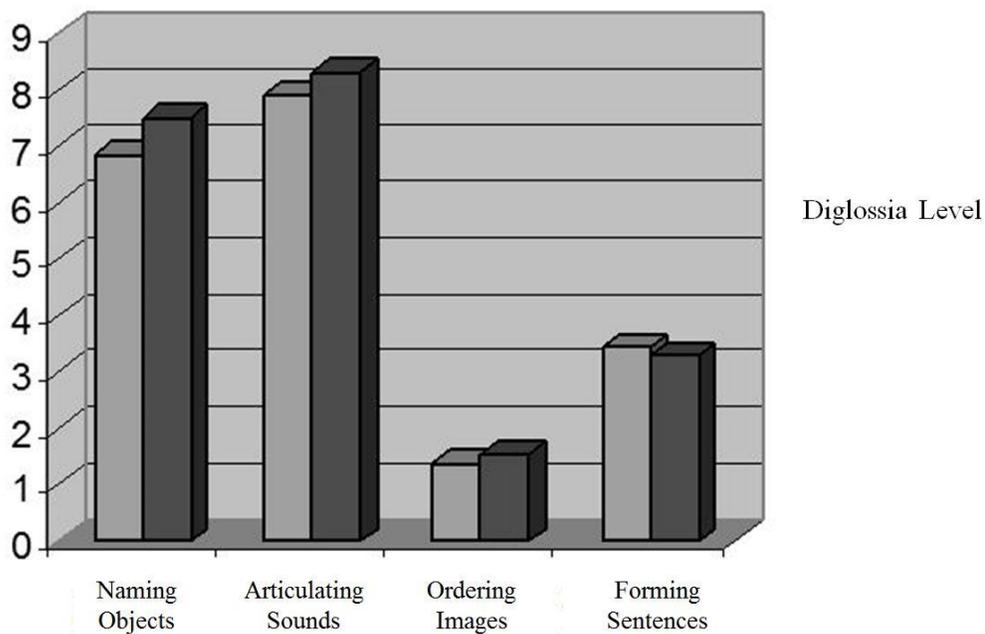
To test H2, a t-test was applied to independent groups in order to compare the mean scores of both subsamples, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Differences between the mean scores of both subsamples

Test	Attended kindergarten (N=33)		Did not attend kindergarten. (N=71)		t-test score	Significance
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Naming objects	6.85	2.195	7.51	2.797	1.192	Not significant
Articulating sounds	7.91	2.919	8.32	3.056	0.653	Not significant
Ordering images	1.39	1.273	1.54	1.307	0.517	Not significant
Forming sentences	3.45	3.299	3.27	2.58	0.302	Not significant
Total	19.61	6.638	20.65	6.818	0.731	Not significant

Table 3 shows that there are no significant differences between the mean scores of the two subsamples in all dimensions of the diglossia test as well as in the total score. Figure 1 illustrates the differences between the mean scores of the two subsamples.

Figure 1. Differences between the mean scores of the two subsamples



Conclusions and Recommendations

It is well known that language grows, changes, and develops throughout an individual's lifetime (Wardhaugh, 1992). Diglossia is a natural linguistic phenomenon that occurs when a language has a long history and its users continue to expand geographically. Manifold forms of Arabic exist and these are used in a range of different situations. However, moving between these forms, especially between standard Arabic and regional dialects, can cause difficulties for young children. This paper examined whether the language learning programs in kindergarten prepare children to move from the form of language used at home to that used at school (i.e., standard Arabic).

The results of the present study show that current language learning programs at kindergarten are insufficient to help children overcome diglossia. No significant differences were found between the mean scores of children who attended and those who did not attend kindergartens in all four dimensions of the presented diglossia test and in the total score. In summary, children show a similar level of diglossia regardless of whether they attend kindergarten before starting school.

These results suggest that the linguistic learning programs in kindergartens are not well suited to bridge the gap between standard Arabic and the child's local dialect. In general, it seems that it is a lack of awareness of diglossia that causes this matter.

Policymakers should thus develop linguistic plans in order to overcome the negative influence of diglossia, especially when children start primary school. In terms of practical recommendations, policymakers should first review and modify the content of the language courses offered in kindergarten. Second, they might consider the effectiveness of government plans to support the use of standard Arabic as a modern language. Finally, they should educate families to help their children and encourage them to read and use standard Arabic. This study did not examine the linguistic contents used in the kindergarten under study neither watch the classes when running. This was not the focus of the current study, but reviewing the contents of the lessons and the methods that are usually used might clarify why children do not benefit from this stage regarding using standard Arabic.

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