

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Bilingual Students' Literacy Skills in the Middle East

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Abstract

The Middle East is a region where educational programs are shifting from single language instruction to dual languages instructions. While working in many schools in the region, I witnessed many children at the elementary level who spoke fluent English, but when it comes to reading they are not equipped with the proper literacy skills to write or read a complete sentence correctly. Western studies (Gay, 2010; McIntyre & Hulan, 2013; Palmer & Martínez, 2013; Rueda & Stillman, 2012; Sheryl & Suleiman, 1993) offer many solutions to this problem, mostly emphasizing on equipping teachers with cultural awareness skills to help diverse students build and develop their literacy skills in their second language, that is in this case, English. Most of Arab countries, specifically in the Arabian Gulf area, recruit native English-speaking teachers to teach English. However the question raised is how much these teachers are aware of the culture of the Arab students? This question initiates school administrators and stakeholders consider hiring foreign teachers that possess an awareness of the culture of their students. This is the main purpose of this paper is to present what the literature indicates regarding teachers with culture awareness skills. It investigates the characteristics of teachers that are culturally responsive and how these characteristics have a positive impact on developing English literacy skills in Arab students. It is a platform for new researches in the Middle East regarding the students' acquisition of well-developed English literacy skills.

Keywords: bilingual students, Middle East region, culturally responsive teacher, literacy skills, English as a second language

Cite as: Habli, F. O. (2015). Culturally Responsive Teaching and Bilingual Students' Literacy Skills in the Middle East. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (3). DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol6no3.22>

Introduction

Bilingual education is a common educational approach that is emerging throughout the world, specifically the Middle East and the Arab Gulf area. According to Al Saghayer (2014), we are living in the globalization era and the world economy is driven by the powers of knowledge, information and technology. The ability to understand and speak a different language is an important tool for international relations and for the development of science and technology (Al Saghayer, 2014). This is one of the most important reasons that forced on the Arab countries to reform their educational programs and enhance the English Language. Hence, this approach sets many challenges to educators, policy makers, parents and students. In order to constitute a clear image of this type of bilingual education in the Arab world, we should define it, specify the students who study such programs and describe the characteristics of the instructors that engage in implementing this approach. We should also strive to have a clear recognition of the components of bilingual education to ensure the success of language, reading and academic achievement in bilingual learners.

Being an educator, I had the chance to work as a teacher and an administrator in Lebanon, UAE and KSA. The schools were national or international schools adopting national, American, British, or International baccalaureate program. In all these schools, the students are considered bilingual students because the schedule is almost equally divided between the English and the Arabic language (see table1). Thus, the language of Instruction is Arabic when teaching the following disciplines: Arabic language, Arabic grammar, religion and social studies. It is English when studying English language, math and sciences. Extracurricular activities are administered in Arabic or English. According to Baker (2007), the schools follow the bilingual educational approach, where the students are defined as bilingual students and instructed in both languages depending on the subject matter.

Table 1. Timetable of grade 3 class in a private school in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Grade 3 (Girls)				
Teachers	Total Sessions per year	Hours	Sessions	Subject
Local Teacher	160	40	4	قرآن Quraan
	40	40	1	توحيد TAwhid
	40	40	1	فقه Fikh
Local Teacher	405	45	9	لغتي Arabic Language
Local Teacher	225	45	5	رياضيات Math/ Arabic
Local Teacher	135	45	3	علوم Science – Arabic
Local Teacher	45	45	1	تربية - Social Studies
Local Teacher	40	40	1	تربية فنية Art
Native English Teacher	400	45	9	English Language
Native English Teacher	90	45	2	Science
Native English Teacher	90	45	2	math
Native English Teacher	40	40	1	Life Skills

Native English Teacher	40	40	1	Activity
			15/ 25	Amount of hours taught by a foreign versus Local teacher
			40	Total Number of Sessions

School administrators, in the Middle East, hire native English speakers to teach English. As table1 highlights, almost one third of the school teachers are foreigners. As the need for foreign teacher is increasing, School administrators and stakeholders should highlight the concern towards what characteristics they look for when hiring a foreign teacher to teach the English. They have to study the efficiency of these characteristics in helping the Arab students acquire proper linguistic skills. These issues pinpoint major concerns and many unresolved problems regarding teaching English to students whose First Language is not English, in this case the students are Arab students, whose first language is Arabic and who live in the Middle East.

This paper is intended to offer a contribution to the topic of bilingual Education in the Middle East, to show that for native English teachers to be able to teach English for bilingual students in the Middle East area, they need to be culturally responsive and aware of the specific needs of the Middle Eastern students.

This introduction sets the tone and the establishment of the different parts of this paper. The first part of this paper is the literature review: it projects a comprehensive overview of the findings of each key concept of the topic: Bilingual children, culturally responsive teacher, and acquisition of the English language skills. The second part is the discussion: it develops a detailed argument to support the notion that English native teachers should know about the cultures of their students and base their teaching experiences on the students own experiences and on the students' own culture, learning behaviors and learning styles. The last part will incorporate the conclusion and the recommendations addressed to all the education communities, parents, teachers and school administrators that are interested in hiring native English speakers and develop in bilingual students the proper English literacy skills.

Literature Review

Many researchers contribute to understanding how bilingual children acquire literacy skills and provide helpful practical theories that many teachers follow to support bilingual children. This literature review continues to explore the 3 key elements of the title and the purpose of this paper: Culturally responsive teaching: Teachers that are culturally responsive help bilingual students developing their English literacy skills. Figure 1. maps the 3 key elements: culturally responsive teachers, bilingual students, English literacy skills.

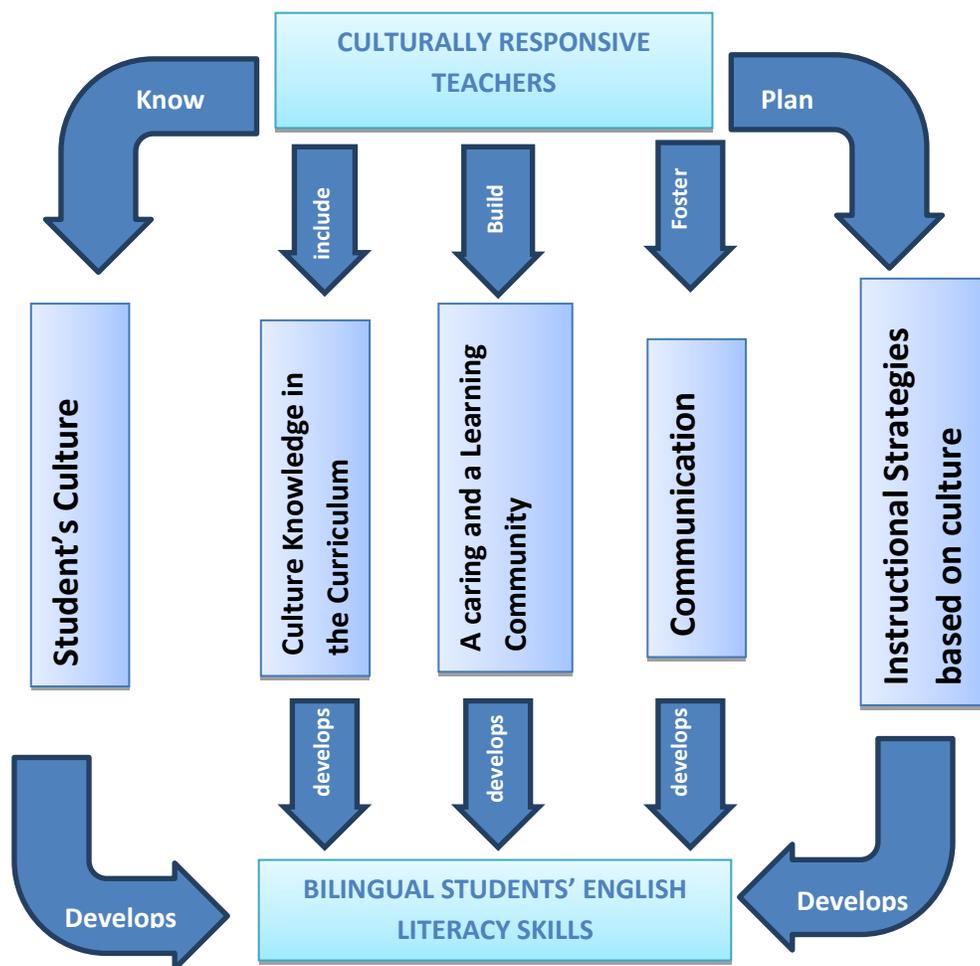


Figure 1. The concept map of the Literature review Key concept

Bilingual Children

Bilingual children are the children who are exposed to two different languages at the same time (Cortazzi, 2000). Garcia and Kleifgen (2010) present statistical data and figures in their book identify who are the bilingual children, how they are defined as bilingual, what procedures do the children undergo to be identified as bilingual students. They did many research in USA to show how new immigrants face difficulty in acquiring the language and show deficiency in their English Language once they enroll in elementary public schools. However, the major concern in this report is about Arabic children learning English. Bacha and Bahous (2011) define bilingual children in the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf region as children who speak English and Arabic at school while outside the school they only use their mother language, Arabic. Both articles came to a same conclusion that these children need to be provided with accurate support and help when it comes to developing their literacy skills (Bacha and Bahous, 2011; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010)

English Literacy Skills Acquisition

Bialystok (2007) and Uchikoshi & Marinova-Todd, (2012) discuss bilingual students and focus on literacy acquisition as well. Their studies are concerned with the development of the literacy skills in bilingual students. They indicate that if teachers know how bilingual children develop their literacy skills, it would be easier for them to develop proper teaching and assessment strategies. Some researchers (Bialystok, 2007; Uchikoshi & Marinova-Todd, 2012) study the development of literacy skills within the mother language and provide a critical background on the foundation of how bilingual children become literate in their second language. Others focus on developing the following literacy skills: oral proficiency, representation of concepts of prints and phonological awareness Bialystok (2007), nonverbal reasoning, vocabulary, phonological awareness and naming speed (Geva & Lafrance, 2011). Geva & lafrance (2011) set a framework about how to teach bilingual children. They discuss, as well, monolinguals and how they acquire reading skills differently from bilinguals. It is very essential to consider the skills mentioned earlier when teaching bilinguals. If one of these skills is not properly developed it may affect the acquisition of proper literacy skills.

Other researchers compare between the literacy acquisition in languages, the mother and the second language (Goodrich, Linogan, & Farver, 2013; Tahan, Messaoud-Galusi & Cline, 2011). Consequently results of these studies can be used to support that acquiring a second language does not hinder the acquisition of a second one. Sheryl and Suleiman (1993) present many considerations and cultural approaches when teaching English to Arabic students. These considerations include the writing systems, the syntactic differences, the sociolinguistics difference between both languages.

These studies contribute to the literature of bilingual education through proposing the proper sequence of the mother language that is L1 and how acquisition of the literacy skills may help bilingual children acquire the same skills in a different language. These research findings imply that educators should focus on helping bilingual children to develop their phonological awareness skills, vocabulary and print awareness in their mother language. Sheryl and Suleiman (1993) reveal that when teachers use the student's L1 linguistic tools, transformation of these skills occur in the students' second language. According to Sheryl and Suleiman (1993) bilingual teachers need to recognize linguistic, historical and cultural considerations to have a positive effect on the educational needs of the bilingual students and their families. Teachers wish to establish positive relations with bilingual students must be prepared to their culture and their histories (Sheryl and Suleiman, 1993). Sheryl and Suleiman (1993) provide important cultural and linguistic information about Arabic-speakers that set a starting point for teachers who are interested in understanding their students and their families. It is believed that providing relevant cultural information, teachers can better structure the curriculum to include this information in the students' school life (Griffer & Perlis, 2007; Sheryl and Suleiman, 1993) and it will accelerate the acquisition of the English language thus resulting in developing proper linguistic skills.

Culturally Responsive Teacher

This part discusses teacher's characteristics that promote intercultural understanding between the teachers and the students, thus resulting in a better acquisition of the English language literacy skills. Johnson (2002) suggested that school administrators and career agents should hire

teachers who bring diverse experiences to their class. Teachers should play a role model, mentors and support culturally different students. He proposes as well to provide teachers with ethnographic experiences, to immerse in the community and interact with locals and other teachers from the same community. These experiences will help the native English teachers to deepen their understanding and awareness of this new community. Jonson (2002) proposed an autobiographical narrative tool. This tool helps teachers to reflect on their experiences and to develop their teaching and learning experiences in accordance to these reflections and teach effectively. This critical reflection examines situations, initiates the teachers into more community or cultural inquiry and develops a more understanding and appreciation.

Culturally responsive teachers are related to students' success. They are trained to identify the barriers and alleviate the students' personality for better achievement (Lenski, Crumpler, Staliworth, and Crawford, 2005). Direct connection and awareness to the cultural backgrounds between the students' daily life and the content of instruction make an interactive curriculum, thus resulting in a better success in the student's school life. Teachers who communicate with bilingual students while working through their culture differences or barriers creates better educational opportunities to those children (Lenski, Crumpler, Staliworth, and Crawford, 2005).

Gay (2010) and Rueda & Stillman (2013) conducted studies in USA and Canada to evaluate what best essential elements for teachers to exhibit in order to provide better learning experiences for bilingual students. They tackle culturally responsive teachers and it affects positively student's achievement or develop student's literacy skills. Culturally responsive teachers constitute five elements:

- 1- Knowing about student's culture.
- 2- Integrate this knowledge in the student's curriculum.
- 3- Build a caring and a learning community.
- 4- Communicate effectively.
- 5- Use the culture of the students to plan for instructional strategies

Culture is related to language, religion, music, art, food, color and costumes. Many subjects have a direct cultural implications and can be included in the teaching and learning process (McIntyre & Hulan, 2013). Every culture has its figures in many areas such as science, literature, poetry, medicine, economy and can be referred to when discussing a particular discipline with bilingual students. Sheryl and Suleiman (1993) present important information about the Arab culture and its language.

Arabic is the language of one of the world's great civilizations, and one to which the West has been profoundly indebted for over a millennium in fields as diverse as mathematics, chemistry, geography, and philosophy. (p.4)

They defined the Arabic culture as a culture of poetry and literature and not bounded to skin color or cuisine or a folkdance, culture in this essence has a deeper meaning. Gay (2010), believe that a culturally responsive teachers are teacher who know how to interpret what culture is, know their students, their culture (Rueda & Stillman, 2012) and their subjects. Once

teachers incorporate these three aspects into their teaching pedagogy, they are known as culturally responsive teachers and help their students in acquiring and developing their English literacy skills.

Include this knowledge in the student's curriculum

Once teachers know about the culture of their students, they can use this knowledge as an instructional resource (McIntyre & Hulan, 2013; Rueda & Stillmen, 2012). Teachers should be able to convert this content knowledge into a culturally responsive curriculum. Teachers should help the students raise critical awareness to the messages that are embedded in these curricula. These key principals are essential to second language learners. Teachers should integrate these principles in the educational program rather than presenting them as supplement to the existing curriculum.

Build a Caring and a Learning Community

Sheryl and Suleiman (1993), imply the importance of teachers appreciating the abilities of the bilingual students within the context of their cultural and ethnic differences. Teachers incorporate this knowledge to all other subject areas such as math, science, music, including language (McIntyre & Hulan, 2013). According to Rueda (2012) teachers make sophisticated connections across all disciplines. Once native English teachers show the responsibility to understand their students capabilities they build a caring and a learning community. Culturally responsive teachers help bilingual students to appreciate the academic knowledge they have gained and to use this knowledge to support and encourage everyone.

Foster communications

Communication within a culture involves many contextual factors. These factors involve body language, use of vocabulary, movements and gestures and the roles of speaker and listener. Culturally responsive teachers should be aware of these factors and accommodate them in their students' learning experiences (Gay, 2010; Rueda & Stillman, 2012). Once teachers are aware of the language style or culture of bilingual students, they can teach them how to shift these styles according to different people and different context.

Plan Instructional Strategies Based on Culture

Learning styles and culture go hand in hand; many cultures have a preferable method for learning (Rueda & Stillman, 2012). Arab culture is based on poetry and literature. Teachers can use Arabic poetry to teach reading, vocabulary and comprehension (Shyril & Suleiman, 1993). If teachers are aware to those styles in the culture they support the bilingual students in developing their literacy skills (Gay, 2010).

This discussion attempts to provide cultural and linguistic information about all bilingual students and Arabic students in particular. The purpose is to assist teachers to know where to start in order to understand Arab bilingual students and their families. Once teachers are familiar with the culture of their students, they can design and plan better learning experiences. Similarly, when they know how Arab bilingual students develop their literacy skills, they can deal with the drawbacks between both languages: first and second language. In addition teachers can pinpoint and deal with transfer pitfalls between English and Arabic to increase the development of the English Language while maintaining the Arabic. Rueda and Stillman (2012)

indicate that teachers need to be very well prepared and trained in order to teach bilingual students effectively.

Education is a major concern to the Arabic countries and students are introduced to two Languages as early as the pre-school level. International school and national schools that adopt an American or a British program tend to hire native speaker teachers to teach the English language. This concern generates many questions and the followings are just few examples of what researchers in the Middle East should be asking: How much awareness do native English teachers possess to the Arab students'? Do they own this content knowledge to be able to incorporate cultural information into the teaching and learning daily practices? The literature review states the absence of this research as to understand the relationship of a culturally responsive teacher and bilingual students. More research should address this issue, if we are looking for a lifelong learning community with a proficient acquisition of the English language.

Conclusion

The literature review pinpoints the importance of equipping the teachers with proper strategies to accurately intervene once bilingual learners experience literacy difficulties (Al Saghayer, 2014; Gay, 2010; Palmer & Martinez, 2013; Rueda & Stillman, 2012). They proposed to go beyond bilingual students and to engage all teachers, native and local teachers, to be culturally responsive. Students can be from different cultures, different economical status, varying abilities but once teachers are responsive to these differences and show the five elements that Gay (2010) discussed in his books, they can help every student. This approach minimizes the barriers that prevent collaborations across teachers, stakeholders and special teachers and it is used as a mean that best helps and supports students. It is based on culture, but culture in this essence is a variable that changes with the experience of the individual in accordance to place and time. Culture is learned and created in the individual's daily life practices (Rueda and Stillman, 2013). To be culturally responsive, all teachers need to collect data about the experiences of the students including their language (Sheryl and Suleiman, 1993; Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive teachers make use of the information collected to develop instructional goals and invest this knowledge for further academic gain (Palmer and Martinez, 2013). These studies unravel the success behind teaching bilingual children that is equipping teachers with cultural awareness. Each of the reviewed articles provides and contributes to the topic of bilingual children and their literacy skills. Each research results show that the development of the first language literacy skills is potentially different from that of the second language literacy skills. Therefore when educators, policy makers and parents are aware of this difference, they can administer many procedures to provide supportive and appropriate learning positive experiences to bilingual children

Recommendations

Recommendations suggested from many researches that studies the same subject, Palmer and Martinez (2013) indicate that training teachers to be culturally responsive will not be as effective as it is expected if the teachers themselves do not own this positive attitude and beliefs toward cultural differences. Instead of training the teachers, recruiting agencies should be more selective in their hiring process.

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Farah Omar Habli is a Lebanese Educator; she has been in the Education field for the last 20 years. She earned her BA in Early childhood education and master degree in educational management from Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon. Currently, she is a PhD candidate at Saint Louis University, MO, USA in curriculum Design and Instruction. She worked in Lebanon and in the Gulf region.

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