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Saudi Parents' Perspectives on Writing Children's Stories in Colloquial Arabic

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Abstract:
This applied sociolinguistic study aims to investigate the perspective of Saudi parents toward using colloquial Arabic for writing children's stories within the context of the sociolinguistic phenomenon of Arabic diglossia, which refers to the use of two separate variations of Arabic language in the Arab-speaking countries, namely, Modern Standard Arabic and colloquial Arabic. An Arab child's first learnt speech language variant is colloquial Arabic, while literacy is based on MSA, which is only learned at school age and through instruction. Therefore, the study investigates the issue whether the quality of language used in Arab children's stories, which has an impact on children's language skills as well as their vocabulary, should be reviewed, especially with the increasing trend to use colloquial dialect in these stories. To investigate parents' perceptions of children's stories written in colloquial Arabic, the study employs a quantitative method implemented through using an attitude questionnaire design. The study sample, which consists of 57 participants, was selected randomly. The participants' opinions help answer the main question of this study, related to the inquiry about the Saudi parents' perspectives and attitudes toward Arabic vernacular children's stories. The study findings indicated that most parents show negative attitudes toward colloquial children's stories, and that 98.2% of the parents think that reading stories in MSA Arabic is essential to a child's development as a reader. The study indicated that parents are also fully aware of the significance of both the content and language generated for children on their reading abilities and academic performance.

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24, May 2023

Abstract

This applied sociolinguistic study aims to investigate the perspective of Saudi parents toward using colloquial Arabic for writing children's stories within the context of the sociolinguistic phenomenon of Arabic diglossia, which refers to the use of two separate variations of Arabic language in the Arab-speaking countries, namely, Modern Standard Arabic and colloquial Arabic. An Arab child's first learnt speech language variant is colloquial Arabic, while literacy is based on MSA, which is only learned at school age and through instruction. Therefore, the study investigates the issue whether the quality of language used in Arab children's stories, which has an impact on children's language skills as well as their vocabulary, should be reviewed, especially with the increasing trend to use colloquial dialect in these stories. To investigate parents' perceptions of children's stories written in colloquial Arabic, the study employs a quantitative method implemented through using an attitude questionnaire design. The study sample, which consists of 57 participants, was selected randomly. The participants' opinions help answer the main question of this study, related to the inquiry about the Saudi parents' perspectives and attitudes toward Arabic vernacular children's stories. The study findings indicated that most parents show negative attitudes toward colloquial children's stories, and that 98.2% of the parents think that reading stories in MSA Arabic is essential to a child's development as a reader. The study indicated that parents are also fully aware of the significance of both the content and language generated for children on their reading abilities and academic performance.

Keywords: Classical Arabic, Colloquial Arabic, Diglossia and Modern Standard Arabic

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List of Abbreviations

LA: Literary Arabic

SA: Standard Arabic

MSA: Modern Standard Arabic or (*Al fus'ha)*

CA: Colloquial Arabic – *Al 'ammeiya*

H: High form

L: Low form

Introduction

Classical Arabic is the standardized literary language of the Qur'an (the holy book of Islam). Since it is the language of the Qur'an (Holes, 2004) and a vast collection of classical Arabic literature dating back centuries before, Classical Arabic is highly revered in the Arabic countries in particular and Islamic countries in general. According to Bassiouney (2009; as cited in Helmi, 2015), Arabic literature appears to have depended on classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic. However, "Classical Arabic is no longer a living language"; in spite of this, its influence is great that it has become "the foundation not only for Modern Standard Arabic - the language used by all Arabic-speaking governments and media outlets - but also for every Arabic dialect used in the modern world" (Qalam wa Lawh, n.d.).

Currently, the Arabic language is characterized by its diglossic quality, whereby two varieties of the same language exist and are distinctively different (Ferguson, 1959; Ayari, 1996; Abu-Rabia, 2000; Oweini et al., 2020). These two main varieties usually referred to in this context are *Fusha* (MSA), which is the unified dialect in the Arabic-speaking world, and *Al 'ammeiya* (Colloquial Arabic), the dialects of which vary by region (Shendy, 2019). MSA is, in fact, not a spoken language mother tongue for Arabs (Mitchell, 1986, as cited in Almossa, 2016) at the present time. The spoken Arabic dialects are the varieties of the language that all native speakers learn as their mother tongue before they begin formal education (Holes 2004: 1). Consequently, Arabic children acquire spoken Arabic even before MSA is learned. In fact, a child's mother tongue and hence earliest speech form is colloquial Arabic, whereas MSA is the language variation upon which literacy is based in the Arab-speaking countries; thus, this later variation is learned only at

school age and by instruction. Arab children must therefore put in a lot of effort to learn MSA when introduced as a formal language for learning at school. Since it is considered new to them, having been brought up to use colloquial dialects until school age; even after that, they depend on their colloquial mother tongue variant in everyday conversation at home and everywhere around them.

In spite of this dominance of colloquial Arabic, it is commonly accepted that Arabic societies have to maintain literary Arabic language as the approved language for teaching children at school in order to preserve Islamic and Arab identities. This is because childhood is a crucial period in a child's life when his/her personality is established, and his/her moral and religious values reinforced. As a result, giving special attention to a child's language, which is an integral element of his or her culture, is one of the most vital components that come into raising a child.

Study Background

Many studies conducted in the domains of psychology and education suggest that the first six years of a child's life contribute to shaping a significant amount of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of his/her personality (Seddik, 2006). These components include language learning and use. In Arab societies, as explained before, the removal of *Al 'ammeiya* (colloquialism) in written expression is mainly obvious in the distinction between the two language forms, resulting in MSA being the only institutionalized style in schools and institutions (Zughoul, 1980, as cited in Oweini et al., 2020). Seen in this context, it was important to encourage the Arab child, at an early stage, to read stories written in MSA and use this language variation in learning and writing if Arabic communities care to preserve their standard language. This aim, however, seems problematic with the children using a colloquial

language variation, but having to receive his school learning in another variety due to the diglossic characteristic of Arabic language. In Arab countries as Saudi Arabia, for example, standard Arabic (SA) is established as the official medium of instruction and the written language used in the Saudi curriculum and textbooks (Alwasel, 2017). In such communities, it is believed that exposing children in diglossic situations to MSA Arabic texts such as children's stories at early ages will enhance their reading ability, comprehension, and knowledge as well as their schooling achievement (Feitelson et al., 1988; Ayari, 1996; Abu- Rabia, 2000; Kweider, 2014).

Children's stories are clearly a successful means of teaching moral principles as well as providing fundamental literacy to children. According to Ferguson (1959), Abu-Rabia (2000), Aram et al., (2013), and Oweini et al. (2020), Arab schoolchildren are taught literary Arabic although their mother tongue is spoken Arabic and the discourse of mothers and children is always in spoken Arabic. Literary Arabic differs from spoken Arabic in vocabulary, phonology, syntax, and grammar, which means that these children read a language with which they have relatively little acquaintance (Feitelson et al., 1993).

Several studies have been conducted to illustrate the negative impact of diglossia on children's reading ability and comprehension, as well as their educational achievement (e.g., Rosenhouse and Shehadi, 1986; Feitelson et al., 1993; Ayari, 1996; Maamouri, 1998; Abu-Rabia, 2000; Leikin et al., 2014; Abu- Rabia et al., 2022). However, it is critical to look beyond this concern and concentrate instead on the linguistic environment in which the Arab children raised, as well as the quality of texts to which they are exposed.

Research Problem

Achieving this aim of concentrating on the Arabic linguistic environment and encouraging children to learn SA to prevent its gradual disappearance among Arab children is becoming more problematic every day. According to Zack (2001), the usage of colloquial language in book dialogues is now almost accepted, and has been applied. This means that the phenomenon of the use of this dialect of Arabic is no longer limited to spoken language, as it once was, but has expanded to include evidently written language as well. This is viewed as a threat by many Arab parents and teachers; the main cause of which is that dialectal language is filled with spelling and grammatical errors, and practicing this weak form of Arabic repeatedly instills it in the minds of our generations before they are aware of the integrity of language, making it difficult to modify (Seddik, 2006). Bani-Khaled (2014) suggested that diglossic Arabic is still a hot topic, and the separation has negative and major consequences for obtaining general literacy in Arabic. Furthermore, Arabic speakers all over the world struggle to master reading because of the diglossic aspects of the language, manifested in two different language forms and the complex writing system of the Arabic language (Maamouri, 1998).

Another issue that intensifies the problem is that the growing absence of interest in story reading among Arab children prevents these young children from gaining knowledge and abilities that are supposed to contribute to literacy transition to MSA (Feitelson, et al., 1993). This problem is occasionally accounted for in terms of the "parents' failure to read to their child", which is viewed as "a reason for the child's inability to learn to read" (Islam and Eltilib, 2020). In this context, parents are considered to play a critical role in improving their children's reading ability. However, many parents are unaware of the benefits of reading to their children's

literacy development (Ayari, 1996). As a result, more colloquial language variations are finding their way to the children's stories, the matter which threatens to slow down the children's literacy in SA and MSA, hinder the development of their reading abilities, understanding, and knowledge of language, and affect their academic performance negatively.

Access to books and exposure to reading in literary/Standard Arabic are considered to be crucial for developing Arabic children's reading ability and comprehension, improving their critical thinking, enriching their vocabulary as well as improving their academic achievements. However, Arabic language learners in a diglossic context confront difficulties in the area of reading which are mainly caused by two factors. First, there is lack of exposure to MSA before formal reading instruction leaves the child with very little knowledge of vocabulary and morphosyntactic structures of MSA, which impacts and weakens the child's linguistic comprehension (Abu-Rabia, 2000; Iraqi, 1990; Kweider, 2014). Second, the gap between colloquial Arabic and MSA creates a barrier for readers that hinders, not only decoding, but also linguistic comprehension. Both of these issues provide a challenge for Arabic children's reading development. This challenge becomes more intense in the light of the fact that only the standard form of language, i.e., MSA, is applied in the Arabic educational system, which means that the widespread of colloquial dialect in children's stories may result in less exposure to standard formal language, and hence, difficulty in mastering this accepted language variation, which is associated with the development of literacy, education and even cultural identity.

Thus, there is urgent need to conduct more descriptive and applied research that helps to implement the necessary tools for encouraging Arabic children to learn and use MSA forms, and investigate the views of everyone concerned, parents

included, with the results of diglossia on learning MSA or the classical (literary) language of the Qur'an. The current applied study attempts to participate in solving the problem by investigating the parents' opinions regarding the use of colloquial Arabic in children's stories in order to find out if there is a necessity to reevaluate the quality and dialectical form of language used in these stories, and hence raise a call for further research that suggests practical solutions for solving children's story-reading problems resulting from the phenomenon of Arabic diglossia.

Purpose of Study

The present study attempts to investigate parents' point of view toward children's stories written in colloquial Arabic as well as their perceptions of the quality of these stories. Ultimately, this study hopes to provide a clear overview of parents' points of view about colloquial stories. The study is directed mainly to teachers, educators, and parents who are encouraged to investigate the quality of reading context used for Arab children. Although Arabic diglossia is viewed by Western scholars as a problematic phenomenon in need of a solution, it is important to look beyond this concern and focus instead on the linguistic environment in which the Arab child is raised, as well as the quality of texts to which he/she is exposed.

Research Questions

This research will attempt to find answers to these two questions:

1. What are the Saudi parents' perspectives and attitudes toward Arabic vernacular children's stories?
2. To what extent are Saudi parents aware of the negative effect of children's stories written in colloquial Arabic on children's reading proficiency and academic performance?

Significance of Study

The significance of the study basically emerges from addressing a currently critical sociolinguistic problem associated with the threat posed by the growing tendency to use colloquial Arabic in children' stories, which is the language variation used only in spoken context until lately. Since the phenomenon resulting from Arabic diglossia can negatively affect the Arab children's future mastery of the socially approved and accepted variation of MSA, the study is expected to contribute to raising awareness about the need for re-evaluating the quality of language that used in the Arabic children's stories.

Oweini et al. (2020) suggested that in order for students to develop a high level of language proficiency and strengthen their reading comprehension, early attention must be given to the high form of oral language because the colloquial form is insufficient and future reading is reliant on formal expression, phonemes, and vocabulary. In addition to that, having access to standard Arabic at an early age through stories, for example, will help children improve their reading skills in literary Arabic and make it more meaningful to them. However, the perspectives of parents on publishing children's stories in colloquial Arabic have not been examined, and here is where this study will mainly contribute.

Literature Review

This part of the study provides a definition of diglossia, Modern Standard Arabic, and Colloquial Arabic. It also provides insights into Arabic children and language, and Arabic children and story. Finally, a general overview of previous studies that examined the diglossia issue from different perspectives is mentioned briefly.

Diglossia

Diglossia is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that refers to a language's two divergent variants (formal and informal) that serve various social functions (Ferguson, 1959). In many speech communities, two or more varieties of the same language are used by some speakers under different conditions. They speak their local dialect in informal situations and use their standard language for formal purposes (Ferguson, 1959; Aram et al., 2013). A clear example of diglossia is represented by the Arabic language, since Arabic speakers use two different varieties of Arabic to meet different purposes. Ferguson (1959), however, defined diglossia 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, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any section of the community for ordinary conversation. (p. 336)

Ferguson (1959) concluded that diglossia may develop from various origins and eventuate in different language situations.

However, Ferguson's (1959) classification has been widely criticized. Meiseles (1980; as cited in Abdel-Jawad and Radwan, 2013), for instance, stated that it would be a serious mistake to assume the existence of a rigid one-variety-one-context situation, partly because the reality of contemporary Arabic is such that every

text embodies an incommensurable amount of variation and shifts alternating between one variety and another, even within the frame of a sentence. According to Abdel-Jawad and Radwan's (2013) analysis of recorded texts reveals that the two polar verities, literary Arabic (LA) and spoken Arabic, are in fact so densely intertwined in the intermediate varieties that none of them can be actually characterized as pure LA or spoken Arabic. Similarly, when referring to stories written in colloquial Arabic, it does not mean that they are wholly colloquial; since the dominant variety is usually the MSA, but an extensive amount of shifting or mixing of varieties will likely occur.

Modern Standard Arabic & Colloquial Arabic

Arabic language is classified as a diglossic language, due to its two different varieties: MSA (*al-Fus'ha)* nd colloquial Arabic (*al'ammeiya*). MSA (which is an updated form of CA or LA) is used to refer to the variety of Arabic that is taught now at schools and has formal and official status throughout the Arab World (Albirini, 2016). According to Altoma, (1969; as cited in Alresaini, 2012), MSA is considered as 'uniform' across the Arabic-speaking world; consequently, it frequently fills the gap left by the low comprehensibility existing between the different colloquial variants in the Arab countries. Colloquial Arabic, on the other hand, refers to a diverse range of Arabic dialects that are regularly spoken by their speakers and do not have a formal status or a standardized orthography (Albirini, 2016).

Furthermore, Ferguson (1959) divided diglossia into two varieties; a. high variety indicated by (H) – which is the Classical Arabic (or MSA in the case of this study), and b. low variety (L) – which is the regional colloquial Arabic. The two varieties are used for specific purposes in different circumstances. For example, the high variety is used in formal lectures, political speeches, news broadcasts, poetry,

etc. In contrast, the low variety is used for training servants or workers, in conversation with family and friends, in some television programs, etc. However, it is common to use the two varieties in one situation; in the case of Arabic, for example, a teacher may lecture in MSA but answer and explain certain concepts in the colloquial variety to ensure understanding (Ferguson, 1959 as cited in Wardhaugh, 2006). In fact, many people prioritize hearing a lecture or a political speech in LA even though it sounds less comprehensible than it would be in spoken Arabic (Ferguson, 1959). Similarly, Arabic speakers consider the H variety (or MSA) as more prestigious than informal Arabic because of the belief that it is the true and pure language (Maamouri, 1998).

MSA, as mentioned earlier, is a development upon for Classical Arabic. This language variety is primarily utilized in formal settings, such as written activities, political speeches, religious sermons, lectures, and news broadcasts. It is learned in a formal educational setting and is not used in ordinary life (Ferguson, 1959; Maamouri, 1998). Ayari (1996) pointed out that educated Arabs may easily understand Literary Arabic which refers to MSA. Local vernaculars, on the other hand, are often associated with illiteracy and ignorance, and are seen as inadequate for expressing complex notions (Ayari, 1996). Furthermore, MSA the official medium of instruction and the written language used in the Saudi curriculum and textbooks (Alwasel, 2017).

Alresaini (2012) mentioned three obvious differences between the MSA and Colloquial Arabic varieties: 1. in terms of syntax, MSA uses a sophisticated system of case marking to differentiate between grammatical functions with obvious case inflections at the end of each word. This has been largely ignored in colloquial

variations, making it difficult to distinguish between grammatical or thematic roles without knowing the context. 2. MSA uses many morphological inflections to distinguish between gender (masculine and feminine) and number (singular, dual, and plural). Contrarily, none of the colloquial variations have the dual form, and several additional forms have been lost in various colloquial types. 3. The general word order used; in MSA is VSO, while the colloquial variations say that it is SVO.

Language of Arab Children

Arab adults speak to their children in colloquial Arabic. Consequently, children use it for speaking and communication. Thus, Colloquial Arabic is the natural way of learning their first language (Ferguson, 1959). However, MSA is the approved tool of education, but since this variety of Arabic is heard much less frequently by Arab children, the actual means of learning it is chiefly accomplished through verbal formal education, whether this is carried out in traditional Qur'anic schools, modern government schools, or private tutors. This difference in the method of acquisition is very important. Arabic speakers only use colloquial Arabic at home and never use MSA for communication. Furthermore, in terms of terminology, regulations, and structure, there is a clear distinction between MSA and Colloquial Arabic.

This vast difference causes genuine problems for Arab children. They stop reading because they do not understand or enjoy what they are reading. The grammatical structure of spoken Arabic is learned without explicit discussion of grammatical concepts; the grammar of MSA is learned in terms of "rules" and norms to be imitated (Ferguson, 1959). Moreover, the modern Arab child's dilemma is that he/she is exposed to the vernacular in his early years of life, learns its vocabulary, and

masters its structures and rules. After that, when he goes to school, he realizes that he must seek knowledge in a language other than his own tongue (Ferguson, 1959; Seddik, 2006). As a result, their cognitive and scientific accomplishments may suffer. According to Al-Dannan (2010, as cited in Alresaini, 2012), writing and book reading are typically the only MSA skills taught in Arab schools, adding that there are frequently few opportunities to speak MSA outside of class, despite the fact that the rules of MSA grammar are explicitly taught in schools. Additionally, pupils at all educational levels frequently perform poorly when speaking this linguistic variant and have low academic accomplishment in Standard Arabic (Maamouri, 1998; Altowayan, 2001; Alnassar, 2007, as cited in Alwasel, 2017).

More specifically, previous studies (e.g., Ayari, 1996; Abu- Rabia, 2000, as cited in Alwasel, 2017) have shown that Arabic-speaking children face difficulties when starting to learn MSA in school because Local Arabic is predominant in society, while exposure to and practice of MSA is generally limited. The best solution for this diglossic situation is by early exposure and knowledge of MSA through stories or MSA television programs, which will facilitate children's ability to understand the high form of Arabic (Gherwash, 2017).

Arab Children and Stories

The child's earliest exposure to literature is through oral narration, which progresses to self-reading (Seddik, 2006). In the Arab world, reading, in general, is often regarded as an unenjoyable act; however, the 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 and knowledge of literacy more challenging. A study by Haeri (2009, as cited in Gherwash, 2017) examined reports of

literacy in Egypt and found that both high school students and librarians expressed their dislike of reading, claiming that the language of books is difficult to read and requires much time. Similarly, Iraqi (1989; as cited in Ayari, 1996), claimed that MSA is too complicated and challenging for young children to comprehend and enjoy. Such studies as such, reveal the negative effect of Arabic diglossia on reading in the Arab world, by shedding light on the wide gap opening between Arab children and MSA, and the threatening effect posed by the dominance of colloquial Arabic.

In addition to the late exposure to formal written Arabic language, there are many other factors that affect readability of stories among Arab children. One can be related to what Weigel et al. (2006) refer to as parental literacy beliefs. In terms of children's literacy skills, the data from Weigel et al.'s (2006) study indicated that the more engaging parental literacy beliefs are, the more developed are children's emergent print knowledge and their interest in reading. Furthermore, along with learning basic literacy, children will learn moral lessons, critical thinking, lexical analysis, and creativity. Thus, according to Seddik (2006), the quality of language used and the type of material presented in children's stories should be reviewed and taken into consideration, as they will have an impact on children's thinking as well as their language, which reflects their identity as both an Arabic and a Muslim.

In addition, the readability level of the story – represented by the difficulty of the words and grammatical constructions, the length of the sentences, and the complexity of the story structure – should be taken into account. Before giving the story to children or any type of written literature, the teacher can read it or portions of it to determine the story's reading level and appropriateness (Al-Jarf, 2015). In other words, parents and teachers are responsible for choosing the type of literature

targeting children. Thus, they should choose a story based on three important aspects; 1. the language used, 2. content, and 3. the child's cognitive knowledge.

Previous Related Studies

Many scholars discussed the effect of dilemma resulting from Arabic diglossia on the writing of novels and stories in the Arab world and its effect on the Arabic children's learners and readers. The new phenomenon of the use of colloquial Arabic outside the limited area of dialogue in Arabic children's stories and even literature in general has started to attract attention of both researchers and educators. Zack (2001), for example, conducted a study on an Egyptian novel, *لبن العصفور /LABAN IL'ẠSFŪR/,* by Yusuf Al- Qa'id, which is fully written in colloquial Arabic. She explained that the author chose to write his novel in colloquial Arabic for two reasons: the language used has a large vocabulary and it is full of proverbs and idioms, so it sounded intriguing. Furthermore, the author noticed that when he uses MSA, the majority of the meaning is lost to the readers, and that they just grasp the story's outline. As a result, the novel was well received by the Egyptian newspaper.

In regard to the effect of Arabic diglossia on learners, Al Zahrani (2013)'s study primarily aimed to identify how Arabic diglossia affects L2 learners' motivation to study Arabic in their native environment. She asserted that L2 learners of Arabic are aware of the Arabic diglossia, and they understand the functional distinction between spoken Arabic and MSA. Even though their awareness of the Arabic nature has little impact on their learning progress. Consequently, the multiple varieties of Arabic effects negatively the motivation level of Arabic L2 learners in general and beginners in particular.

In an article titled "The (Arabic) Children's Book Dilemma," *Arablit & Arablit Quarterly* (2010) discussed the issue of whether it was better to get stories for children in *Fusha* (MSA), or *Al 'ammeiya* (Colloquial Arabic). This article sums up the problem as follows:

> Children's books are almost entirely written in fos'ha, or "literary," formal Arabic. That's wonderful, because they'll be learning fos'ha in school, as they should: much excellent literature is in fos'ha. But nobody (at least no one normal) speaks fos'ha. And if you want to grab the attention of a toddler and make them love literature, you probably need to use everyday speech. Or at least a mixture of fos'ha and everyday speech.

Leikin et al. (2014) examined Arabic children's ability to retell stories that were presented in spoken and literary Arabic. The participants were 30 native Arabic children at the kindergarten level. Children were asked to retell two stories; the first one was narrated in LA and the other in spoken. Furthermore, two questionnaires were answered by parents to evaluate the level of children's exposure to literary Arabic at home. The study's findings showed that diglossia negatively impacts children's mastery level of both literary and spoken Arabic. Moreover, children's knowledge and ability of spoken Arabic is better than LA regarding two points; narrative ability and linguistic competence. Although, the study showed that children had definite opportunities for mastering LA regardless of the linguistic differences between the two varieties.

Oweini et al.'s (2020) study was conducted to investigate the impact of diglossia on Classical Arabic and its relation with acquiring English as a foreign language. They pointed out that diglossia has a negative impact on Arab children's

learning achievements, it negatively affects their reading proficiency, grammar, and comprehension. Their study findings showed that Classical Arabic phonemes were easier to comprehend than colloquial Arabic phonemes. This might be linked to the fact that learning colloquial language skills was easier attributed to the reason that informal communication was not as reliant on schooling as classical Arabic. However, these difficulties in learning classical Arabic increased as learners progressed through school. Oweini et al. (2020) added that bilingual education is considered an additional complication factor for the acquisition of vocabulary in diglossic Arabic.

However, there are arguments for and against writing in colloquial Arabic. Some writers argue that literature should be produced in MSA, while others believe that MSA is extremely complex lexically and syntactically, and its archaic canons make message delivery inefficient. As a result, the most vital feature is that their message is completely understood by the readers (Pîrlog, 2020). A study conducted by Al-Kahtany (1997), for example, revealed that the respondents did not see the diglossic condition as creating a serious issue.

Going through the existing literature, it appears that most studies that explored this issue focused mainly on: the effect of the spoken colloquial Arabic on children's ability to read as well as their comprehension of MSA (e.g., Feitelson et al., 1993; Maamouri, 1998; Iraqi, 1990; Leikin et al., 2014); the influence of Arabic diglossia in the written production of native speakers (e.g. Almossa, 2016); the negative impact of both Arabic diglossia and bilingual education on children's learning achievements (e.g., Oweini et al., 2020); the influence of diglossia on learning and teaching MSA (Alwasel, 2017); the impact of Arabic diglossia on L2

learners' motivation towards learning Arabic as a second language (e.g. Al Zahrani, 2013). None, however, seems to investigate either the negative impact of literature written in colloquial Arabic on children's ability to read and their comprehension, or parents' perspectives toward this issue. Therefore, current study attempts to fill in the gap and investigate parents' perspectives toward children's stories written in colloquial Arabic as well as their awareness of the quality and content of literature presented or targeting their child(ren).

Research Methodology

Research design and method

The current study uses a quantitative approach, being conducted through an attitude questionnaire design to find out parents' opinions about children's stories written in colloquial Arabic.

Instruments and Procedures

The present study uses a questionnaire as a tool for collecting the primary data. Google Forms was used to create the questionnaire and collect data. This questionnaire was divided into two parts (two types of questions). The first part of the questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice questions (MCQs), including questions related to the participants' gender (mother or father); level of education, (i.e., high school, 4- year college, a graduate degree); occupation (specifically: a teacher or others), and how often parents read to their child.

The second section of the survey was made up, in line with Perry (2011), of closed-form items that provide a set of alternative answers to each item from which the respondent must select at least one. This part, which included 13 statements, is about the types of books that are read to children. It included three groups of

questions: 1. questions related to children's stories written in MSA (statements 1-7), 2. questions related to children's stories written in CA (statements 8-10, and 3. questions related to the quality of children's stories in general (statements 11-13). However, the questions were graded on a scale from 1–5 known as the Likert-type scale, with different values for each question. Examples of mentioned statements are: a. I found MSA hard to be comprehended by children, b. I prefer colloquial Arabic stories because they save my time and effort, c. My child understands MSA stories, and d. I prefer reading MSA stories to my child. The answer options are (1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5 = strongly agree). However, the language used in the questionnaire was Arabic because it is targeting native Arabic speakers. Finally, after around two weeks of collecting the responses, the researcher analyzed the given data to reach the overall result of the study by using SPSS software.

Participants

The population of the study consists of native Arabic parents who participated in the questionnaire that was targeted to investigate their attitudes and points of view regarding the use of vernacular Arabic in stories written for children. The study population's age and nationality were not specified. Participants were required to answer the questionnaire's questions, and they were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that all responses would be kept private. However, the questionnaire was sent randomly through a social media application (WhatsApp). According to Van and Hundley (2001; as cited in Helmi, 2015), a successful research study should have between 25 to a few hundred informants. Consequently, participants of the study were 57; however, mother respondents have predominated in the study as the overall number consisted of 53 (93%) mothers and only 4 fathers (7%) (see Table 1). The reason for this was that the questionnaire was sent mainly to

female WhatsApp groups. Moreover, more than half of the participants were teachers 52.6% (See Table 2).

Table 1.

Participants' Information

	No. of participants
Mother	**53 (93%)**
Father	**4 (7%)**
Total	**57**

Results and findings

This section presents the quantitative data analysis and the result of the study which attempts to answer the study's two questions:

1. What are the Saudi parents' perspectives and attitudes toward Arabic vernacular children's stories?
2. To what extent are Saudi parents aware of the negative effect of children's stories written in colloquial Arabic on children's reading proficiency and academic performance?

Questionnaire Analysis

The educational level of parents was as follows: 15 (36.3%) had completed high school; 35 (61.4%) had completed a 4-year college degree; and 7 (12.3%) had completed a graduate degree. Therefore, based on the given data, the majority of the

study's participants had completed their higher education. Table 2 illustrates the participants' educational backgrounds.

Table 1

The Children's Parent Levels of Education

Level of education	**No. of participants**
High school	15 (36.3%)
Bachelor's	35 (61.4%)
Graduate degree	7 (12.3%)

Table 3 below reveals that 20 (35.1%) of parents read to their child(ren) once a week. In comparison, 16 (28.1%) and 13 (22.8%) of the replies showed that parents reading three times a week and once a month are ranked second and third, respectively. It is noticeable that just eight (14%) parents read to their children on a daily basis.

Table 2.

How Frequently Parents Read to Their Child(ren)

Frequency	**No. of responses**
Everyday	8 (14%)
Three times a week	16 (28.1%)
Once a week	20 (35.1%)
Once a month	13 (22.8%)

Table 4 lists the parents' professions; it indicates that 30 (52.6%) of the parents are teachers, and the remaining 27 (47.4%) are employed in occupations other than teaching.

Table 3.

Parents' Occupation

Occupation	**No. of participants**
Teacher	30 (52.6%)
Other	27 (47.4%)
Total	57

Based on Table 4, it could be argued that the findings of the questionnaire provide information about parents' opinions and attitudes toward children's stories written in the standard and colloquial varieties of Arabic. As mentioned before, the second part of the questionnaire is divided into three groups of questions: 1. questions related to children's stories written in MSA (statements 1-7), 2. questions related to children's stories written in CA (statements 8-10), and 3. questions related to the quality of children's stories in general (statements 11-13).

Table 5 below illustrates information related to views about children's stories written in MSA (statements 1-7). However, as seen in the table, in relation to Statement 1, the majority of parents, who amount to 31(54.4%), believe that MSA is not difficult to comprehend by their children. Conversely, only 4 (7%) strongly agree

and 8 (14%) agree that the H form of Arabic is challenging to understand. However, 24.6% of parents remained neutral and uncertain about this statement. In relation to Statement 2, the majority of parents tend to read the standard variety used in books without translating it to the colloquial form for their children, 21 (36.8%) and 10 (17.5%) chose to disagree and strongly disagree respectively with reading the *fusha* story themselves first and then retelling it to their child[ren] using colloquial Arabic. While 8 (14%) and 10 (17.5%) of the participants agree and strongly disagree respectively that they read the *fusha* story and then translating it to *Al'ammeyia*.

As for Statement 3, all of the participants expressed their agreement with the importance of the standard variety of Arabic in improving their child's reading performance, except one participant (1.8%) who strongly disagreed with this statement.

As for Statement 4, regarding the form parents prefer to read, around 89% of the parents expressed preference to read the story in MSA. Only two participants (2.16%) reported that they do not agree to reading the MSA form to their child. Statements 5-6 received similar responses, since around 78% of participants agreed that their child(ren) understand and enjoy the standard form of Arabic stories, while the remaining participants believe that MSA stories are difficult to understand and that their children did not enjoy them. Responses to Statement 7 revealed similar results to Statement 3 (I find that children's stories written in MSA are important for developing my child's reading skills). In response to Statement 7, 77.2 % agreed and 17.5% strongly agreed (that is a total of 94.7% of the participants) that they believe children's stories written in MSA are useful for their child[ren]'s academic achievement (See Table 5).

Table 4.

Parents' Attitudes Toward Children's Stories Written in MSA

Item no.			Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	mean
1	I find Standard Arabic difficult for children to understand	N	4	8	14	19	12	
		%	7%	14%	24.6%	33.3%	21.1%	2.53
2	If the story is written in Fusha, I read it by myself first and then retell it to my child using colloquial Arabic.	N	10	8	8	21	10	
		%	17.5%	14%	14%	36.8%	17.5%	2.77
3	I find that children's stories written in MSA are important for developing my child's reading skill	N	46	10	0	0	1	4.75
		%	80.7%	17.5%	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%	
4	I prefer reading MSA stories to my child.	N	38	13	3	1	1	4.46
		%	66.7%	22.8%	5.3%	1.8%	1.8%	
5	My child understands MSA stories	N	24	23	6	3	1	4.16
		%	42.1%	40.4%	10.5%	5.3%	1.8%	
6	My child enjoys MSA stories.	N	21	23	10	2	1	4.07
		%	36.8%	40.4%	17.5%	7%	1.8%	
7	I believe that children's stories written in MSA are useful for my child's academic achievement.	N	44	10	2	0	1	4.68
		%	77.2%	17.5%	3.5%	0.0%	1.8%	

Table 6 demonstrates information about children's stories written in colloquial Arabic (statements 8-10). Based on responses to Statement 8, it is obvious that more than half the participants do not believe that using vernacular stories is a good way to save time and effort, for 35 of the parents (26.3% and 35.1%) disagree and strongly disagree respectively with the statement, 'I prefer colloquial Arabic stories because they save my time and effort.' In contrast, roughly 19% of parents believe that using informal storytelling can help them save time and effort. In relation to Statement 9, about 28% of parents (15.8% and 12.3%) agreed and strongly agreed that encouraging children to read stories in spoken Arabic is crucial for reading development. In comparison, about 59% of parents think that reading stories in informal Arabic is not essential to a child's development as a reader. However, 12.3%, which is not a small number, remained neutral and uncertain about this statement. In regards to Statement 10, according to 11% of parents, their children enjoy vernacular stories. Conversely, 21 (36.8%) and 8 (14%) of parents disagree and strongly disagree with the statement (10) respectively, while (29.8%) of parents could not specify whether to agree or disagree with this statement. As a result, around half the participants revealed disagreement with the use of the low form of Arabic (Colloquial Arabic) in children's stories.

Table 6.

Parents' Attitudes Toward Children's Stories Written in CA

Item no.			**Strongly agree**	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**	**mean**
8	I prefer colloquial Arabic stories	N	6	5	11	15	20	3.67

	because they save my time and effort.	%	10.5%	8.8%	19.3%	26.3%	35.1%	
9	I believe that colloquial Arabic stories are important for developing my child's reading skill	N	9	7	7	17	17	3.46
		%	15.8%	12.3%	12.3%	29.8%	29.8%	
10	My child prefers stories written in the A'amyia.	N	7	4	17	21	8	3.34
		%	12.3%	7%	29.8%	36.8%	14%	

Table 7 reveals information about the quality and content of the children's story (statements 11- 13). In response to Statement 11, 73.7% of parents showed a lot of care about the content of their child(ren)'s story. Only 4 (7.1%) of the parents revealed less attention to the content of their child(ren)'s story. In response to Statement 12, the majority of parents (48 (84.2%), and 7 (12.3%)) agreed and strongly agreed respectively that they choose for their child(ren)'s stories that contain moral and learning messages. Fewer parents (3.5%), on the contrary, did not care if their children are exposed to moral and educational values. In line with statement 12 above, responses to Statement 13 indicated that most parents (49, (86%) and 6 (10.5%)) agreed and strongly agreed respectively that the quality of the written stories has a significant impact on how effectively their children's language, linguistic, and verbal inventories are developed. Interestingly enough, the responses to Statements 11, 12 and 13 showed no neutral responses as in the case of other statements in Tables 5 and 6, which indicates that there was no hesitance expressed regarding the required quality of children's stories and its effect.

Table 7.

Information about the Quality and Content of Children's Stories

Item no.			**Strongly agree**	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**	**mean**
11	I care about the content of my child's story	N	42	9	2	1	3	4.51
		%	73.7%	15.8%	3.5%	1.8%	5.3%	
12	I choose books that contain moral and learning messages	N	48	7	0	0	2	4.74
		%	84.2%	12.3%	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	
13	The quality of the written stories plays a big role in developing my child's language and linguistic and verbal inventory as well.	N	49	6	0	0	2	4.75
		%	86%	10.5%	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	

Discussion

As mentioned earlier, the main aim of this study is to examine parents' perspectives toward children's stories written in colloquial Arabic. Consequently, two main questions were be answered as shown below:

Q. 1 What are the Saudi parents' perspectives and attitudes toward Arabic vernacular children's stories?

The practical outcome of the study has displayed that the majority of parents believed that MSA is not difficult to comprehend by their children, in contrast to the findings of Iraqi's study (1989; as cited in Ayari, 1996) which claims that MSA being too difficult and complex for their children to understand and enjoy at this age. According to Iraqi, kindergarten instructors felt that children under the age of five should not be exposed to literary Arabic since they would be unable to grasp the stories read in this language. However, this study has shown that the majority of parents, whose rate amount to 98.2% of the participants, think that reading stories in formal (MSA) Arabic is essential to a child's development as a reader. It is obvious that parents believe that their child(ren) understand and enjoy the standard form of Arabic stories. Parents are also aware of the importance of the standard variety of Arabic in improving their child's reading performance as well as schooling achievements. Furthermore, regarding the form parents prefer to read, nearly 89% of parents expressed preference to read stories in MSA instead of Colloquial Arabic for their child(ren).

Q. 2 To what extent are Saudi parents aware of the negative effect of children's stories written in colloquial Arabic on children's reading proficiency and academic performance?

According to the results of the questionnaire, most parents nearly (54%) indicated that they tend to read the standard form of stories without translating them into the colloquial form for their children. This result is contrary to the findings of Doake's study (1989; cited in Alresaini, 2012), which claimed that even when families read to their children from books, they frequently adapt the standard form used in books

to the vernacular form for their children. It is obvious that parents are aware of both the content and language produced to their children, since about 96% of the participants indicated that they chose books that contain moral and learning values. Therefore, most parents (95%) revealed their agreement that the content and the quality of the written stories have a significant impact on how effectively their children's language, linguistic, and verbal inventories are developed.

To sum up, it is evident that most parents are fully aware of the significance of the language and content that are presented to children on their reading abilities and academic successes. As a result, they are aware of how the low form of Arabic can negatively affect their children's verbal inventories and linguistic skills. Based on the given data, the majority of parents (59.6%) show negative attitudes toward the effect of colloquial children's stories on developing their child(ren's) reading skills.

Conclusion

This study deals with an important sociolinguistic issue, which is the effect of Arabic diglossia on children's reading skills as seen from the perspective of Saudi parents, especially in regard to using colloquial Arabic for writing children's stories. Arabic language is categorized as a diglossic language since it has two distinct forms: *al-Fus'ha* and *al'ammeiya*. Due to its two separate varieties, Arabic speakers in general and Arabic children in particular face difficulties in reading MSA. The study investigates whether the development of reading skills, comprehension, or knowledge will be aided or negatively affected by children's literature written in colloquial Arabic. In general, Arab children must get as familiar as possible throughout their first five years of life with the patterns, sounds, and rhythms of literary Arabic in order to make the transition to reading as smooth and feasible as possible (Feitelson et

al, 1993). Consequently, access to books and exposure to reading in literary Arabic are crucial for developing Arabic children's reading ability and comprehension, improving their critical thinking, enriching their vocabulary as well as improving their academic achievements. However, the question whether children's reading comprehension will be much improved with early exposure to MSA before they start reading in school is a controversial issue among researchers in the field.

Based on the findings of the present study, it seems acceptable to claim that parents are aware that children's stories are clearly a successful means of teaching moral principles as well as fundamental literacy in MSA forms. Therefore, in order for children to develop a high level of language proficiency and strengthen their reading comprehension, earlier attention must be given to the high form of oral language because the colloquial form is insufficient and future reading is reliant on formal expression, phonemes, and vocabulary. Additionally, having access to MSA at an early age through written books and stories, for instance, can help them improve the children's reading skills in literary Arabic.

The main conclusion of the present study is that the perspectives of parents on children's stories written in colloquial Arabic were mostly negative. This is related to their agreement that the written stories' quality and substance have a big impact on how well their children's linguistic ability can develop.

Implications

Using colloquial Arabic for either writing or narrating children's stories is not purely negative or harmful for children, but stories should not be fully written in low forms of language. Though it is important that the quality of the language used to

target children should be sufficient and understandable, it is also equally important that MSA should be introduced to children at least partly before school. In other words, for writing children's literature, whether MSA or a merge of *Fus'ha* or *Al 'ammeyia* is used, the language form should be applied in a manner that makes the level of language and content appropriate for the child's cognitive level. Consequently, the parent's role at this stage is to select a story based on the child's level of proficiency and interest along with exposing the child to MSA in one way or another. As for colloquial Arabic, it can exist and support the child's educational process.

To conclude, the study's outcome emphasizes the importance of MSA on children's linguistic development and school achievements. Thus, early attention to MSA, even if a little amount of colloquial is used, will aid children's language development, reading abilities, and facilitate literacy transition. Ultimately, parents and educators are encouraged to expose young Arabic-speaking children to MSA, practice some language activities that play a significant role in developing their linguistic ability, and ask frequent questions to ensure that the child understands the high form of Arabic.

Suggestions and Recommendations for Future Studies

The use of MSA Arabic by teachers at all levels is also advised since it will improve students' reading abilities and bring the language closer to and more relevant to their lives. It is also recommended that researchers who want to explore more about diglossia to investigate the reading behavior of both parents and their child(ren) (e.g. the time parents spent reading with their child(ren), how often parents visited the library) or language activities given to the child (e.g. define new LA terms, retell the

story by the child's own words, guessing the meaning). Moreover, future studies could explore the opinion of other age groups (e.g., adults and teenagers) in regard to the colloquial written literature. In addition to that, other studies could investigate challenges that may face both parents and child(ren) on reading activities or understanding MSA such as lack of reading materials or engaging the child in reading activity. Future studies could also explore how parents' attitudes toward children's stories influence their children's ability to read or understand literature written in MSA.

Limitations of the study

Numerous restrictions apply to the study. First, the small sample size is the major limitation of this study, due to which the results cannot be generalized over a larger population. 93% of the study's participants are mothers, which means that it has been directed more towards female opinions of Arabic diglossia, therefore, the results cannot be generalized across both genders. Additionally, the study did not explore the relation between parents' jobs and their perspectives on children's literature. Moreover, the study didn't compare parents' perspectives in relation to their level of education and level of income (e.g. Alwasel, 2017) or family's income (e.g. Weigel, et al., 2006). Furthermore, the study focuses mainly on only one form of language presented to children which is the written form (story). Finally, the study did not specify the age group of either parents or their child(ren), or the number of children

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Appendices

Appendix A

Questionnaire (Arabic version)

وجهة نظر أولياء الأمور والمعلمين حول كتابة قصص الأطفال باللغة العربية العامية

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته

أنت مدعو للمشاركة في مشروع بحثي يهدف إلى دراسة وجهة نظر أولياء الأمور والمعلمين تجاه قصص الأطفال المكتوبة بالعامية. للتنويه: المشاركة في الاجابة تطوعية تمامًا وجميع الردود ستبقى سرية لأغراض بحثية فقط.

شاكرين لكم تعاونكم.

الجزء الأول:

أختر الإجابة الصحيحة: ١/أم ٢/ أب

مستوى التعليم: ١/ ثانوي ٢/ جامعي ٣/ دراسات عليا

عدد مرات القراءة للأطفال:

١/ يومياً ٢/ مره في الأسبوع ٣/ ثلاث مرات في الأسبوع ٤/ مره في الشهر

المهنة: ١/ معلم/ة ٢/ أخرى

الجزء الثاني:

هذا الجزء يشمل أسئلة متعلقة بقصص الأطفال:

رقم	السؤال	موافق بشدة	موافق	محايد	غير موافق	غير موافق بشدة
١.	أجد أن اللغة العربية الفصحى صعبة الفهم للأطفال.					
٢.	إذا كانت القصة مكتوبة بالفصحى، أقرأها أولاً ثم ألقيها لطفلي مستخدماً العامية.					
٣.	أجد أن قصص الأطفال المكتوبة بالفصحى مهمه لتطوير مهارة القراءة لطفلي.					
٤.	أفضل قرأت قصص الأطفال المكتوبة باللغة العربية الفصحى لطفلي.					
٥.	يفهم طفلي قصص الأطفال المكتوبة باللغة العربية الفصحى					
٦.	يفضل طفلي قصص الأطفال المكتوبة باللغة العربية الفصحى.					
٧.	اعتقد أن قصص الأطفال المكتوبة بالفصحى مفيدة لتحصيل طفلي الدراسي.					
٨.	أفضل قصص الأطفال المكتوبة بالعامية لأنها توفر وقتي وجهدي.					
٩.	تساعد قصص الأطفال المكتوبة بالعامية على تطوير مهارة القراءة.					

١٠.	يفضل طفلي القصص المكتوبة بالعامية.					
١١.	اختار بعناية محتوى القصة قبل قرأتها/ شرائها.					
١٢.	اختار قصص أطفال تحتوي على رسائل أخلاقية وتعليمية قيمة.					
١٣.	جودة القصص المكتوبة تعلب دوراً كبيراً في تطوير لغة طفلي والمخزون اللغوي واللفظي أيضاً.					

Appendix B

Questionnaire (English version)

Dear Participants:

You are invited to participate in a research project that aims to examine parents' and teachers' perspectives toward children's stories written in colloquial Arabic. Note that completing this questionnaire takes approximately 5 minutes. We assure you that participation is voluntary, that researchers will treat the data confidentially, and that it is for research purposes only.

Section 1:

Choose: 1/ Mother 2/ Father

Level of education:

had completed 1/ high school 2/ 4- year college. 3/ a graduate degree)

The number of times you read to your child:

1/ Everyday 2/ once a week 3/ three times a week 4/ once a month

Occupation:

1/ Teacher 2/other

Section 2:

This part includes questions related to children's stories:

Item no.	Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	I find Standard Arabic difficult for children to understand					
2.	If the story is written in Fusha, I read it by myself first and then retell it to my child using colloquial Arabic(the spoken form).					
3.	I find that children's stories written in MSA are important for developing my child's reading skill					
4.	I prefer reading MSA stories to my child.					
5.	My child understands MSA stories.					
6.	My child enjoys MSA stories.					
7.	I believe that children's stories written in MSA are useful for my child's academic achievement.					

8.	I prefer colloquial Arabic stories because they save my time and effort.					
9.	I believe that colloquial Arabic stories are important for developing my child's reading skill.					
10.	My child prefers stories written in the a'amyia.					
11.	I care about the content of my children's story.					
12.	I choose books that contain moral and learning messages.					
13.	The quality of the written stories plays a big role in developing my child's language and linguistic and verbal inventory as well.					

Appendix C

The Study Questionnaire Referees

Name	Designation	Institute
Dr. Awad Alshehri	Associate Professor	Imam University
Prof. Mohammed Alhuqbani	Professor	Imam University
Dr. Sulaimain Alnujaidi	Ph.D	Imam University