

Children's Books as a Bridge to Overcome Diglossia: A Case Study of Arabic Children's Stories in Tripoli, Libya

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to investigate the efficacy of children's books to overcome the diglossic linguistic phenomenon in Tripoli, Libya. The qualitative analytical research method was employed by which four Arabic children stories written in Modern Standard Arabic, (MSA) were examined. The problematic lexicons the child may face due to the vast difference between MSA language and the Libyan Tripolitania Dialect were studied. A list of words in Modern Standard Arabic, which were complex for a child to understand, had been selected and organised into tables. Each word was accompanied by its transcription, the equivalent word in the Libyan Tripolitania dialect, its transcription and finally the English translation of the word. It was found that the stories were written in a simple language suitable for the age group of seven to nine. The writer gave the lexicons that might pose a challenge to the child extra attention to simplify them and ease comprehension so as to intensify the pleasure of reading. Repetition was also utilized to explain and teach the new lexicons. Pictures were artistically employed to clarify some of the ambiguous words. Some recommendations to further overcome diglossia were highlighted

المخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى التحقيق في فعالية كتب الأطفال للتغلب على الظاهرة اللغوية المزدوجة في طرابلس، ليبيا. تم اختيار عشوائياً لأربع قصص أطفال عربية مكتوبة باللغة العربية الفصحى الحديثة (MSA) وفحصها للتحقق من المفردات الصعبة التي قد يواجهها الطفل بسبب الاختلاف الشاسع بين اللغة الفصحى ولهجة طرابلس العامية الليبية. تم اختيار الكلمات ووضعها في جداول متضمنة النسخ الصوتي لكل منها تم إضافة الكلمة بالعامية الليبية ومجاور لكل كلمة أضيف النسخ الصوتي وأخيراً ترجمة الكلمة إلى اللغة الإنجليزية. وجد أن القصص كانت مكتوبة بلغة بسيطة مناسبة للفئة العمرية من السابعة إلى التاسعة. وأعطى الكاتب الكلمات التي قد تشكل تحدياً للطفل اهتماماً إضافياً لتبسيطها وتسهيل فهمها وذلك لزيادة متعة القراءة. كما تم استخدام التكرار لشرح وتعليم الأساليب الجديدة. تم استخدام الصور بطريقة فنية لتوضيح بعض الكلمات الغامضة. وتضمن البحث بعض التوصيات للتغلب على ازدواجية اللغة.

KEYWORDS: MSA, Diglossia, Children's, Tripoli

Introduction

Reading children's books plays a significant role in the development of the intellectual, linguistic and psychological growth of a child. It is a vital source that provides pleasure and stimulates children's imagination and their ability to contemplate and think. In addition, it is a vibrant means of yielding information and a resource of communicating moral values. It is a means that builds and strengthens the child's linguistic abilities. Yet many children in the Arab World are deprived of the privileges of reading children's books due to diglossia. As the Arabic language is one of the diglossic languages, reading children's books is considered a challenging experience for almost the majority of children in the Arab World. This paper aims to tap on a new site which, as far as the researcher knows, has not been tapped in Libya before; that is the efficacy of reading Arabic children's stories by children to overcome the linguistic phenomena of diglossia of the Arabic language.

Diglossia has been defined by Ferguson (1959:326) as 'the existence of two varieties of the same language side-by-side in a speech community, each variety having a specialized function'. According to Fishman (1967:34), diglossia is regarded as a 'characterization of linguistic organization at the sociocultural level'. In the Arabic language, for example; one can identify at least two forms of the language, mainly, Classical Arabic (CA) which is known in a more modernized form as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Vernacular or Dialect Arabic. Each of the above-mentioned forms of Arabic is used in a 'different social context' serving 'different sociolinguistic functions' (Thompson & Thomas-Ruzic, 1983:609).

Classical Arabic is the language of Koran (the sacred book of Islam) and is the most eloquent Arabic language via which most pre-modern literary works were composed. Modern Standard Arabic differs minutely from Classical Arabic in stylistic and lexical considerations. It is the language of publications nowadays ranging from newspapers to literary works. It is also the means of communication for formal broadcasts such as news

programmes and political speeches. According to Maamouri (1998), MSA is no one's mother tongue.

In contrast to Modern Standard Arabic, which is the formal language that is used to accomplish formal functions, Vernacular or Dialect is used by the vast majority of the population in the Arab world for verbal communications. There are some characteristic features of Vernacular or Dialect Arabic that are shared with other vernacular languages throughout the world. Firstly, it is an oral language; it is a non-official written language. Secondly, it is spoken by ordinary people as one's mother tongue, i.e., it is not learnt or imposed as a second language. Thirdly, it is often used for a relatively narrow range of informal functions such as communicating with family and friends and dealing with those around to meet the everyday needs.

In Libya, specifically in Tripoli, being part of the Arab World, Modern Standard Arabic is used as the official language and; hence it is the language of formal speaking situations such as sermons, lectures, news broadcasts, and speeches and in all formal writing such as official correspondence, literature and newspapers.

Modern Standard Arabic has to be learnt as a second language, the Vernacular language or the Libyan Tripolitania Dialect being the first language or the mother tongue. Much effort is put in order to master the second language. It is learnt in schools and mosques, and besides through exposure to television and radio programmes, magazines, newspapers and books. The educated elite tend to be highly proficient in speaking and writing in MSA. The level of proficiency in MSA varies considerably among the less fortunate Libyan population.

Reading books is considered as one of the effective methods to learn and master a language, yet a report published in 2011 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 'UNESCO' revealed that the latest statistics indicated that the Arab person reads seven minutes annually, while the American reads six minutes per day. In addition, it showed that the share of every million Arabs does not exceed thirty books, compared to 854 books per a million Europeans. This means that the average reading of an Arab person is a quarter of a page per year compared to a large reading rate for the American individual, which reaches to eleven books per year. However; according to the results of the Arab Reading Index, released during the Knowledge

Summit in December 2016 in Dubai, the statistics (Al Maktoum Foundation 2017) are more favourable than the 'UNESCO' report of 2011 for most of the Arab countries. It revealed that "on average, the Arab citizen reads around (17 books and 35 hours per year). The index also exhibited that in terms of reading for Northeast Africa, Egypt led the pack with 89% (64 hours and 27 books per individual per year). Morocco, led the Maghreb region countries with a score of 87% (57 hours and 27 books), followed by Tunisia with 70% (47 hours and 22 books) and Algeria with 51% (36 hours and 17 books). Libya with 23% (18 hours and 10 books). The statistics, for Libya are alarming. They evidently reflect the sheer scale of the problem that of low reading rate. The urgency of shedding light on its causes, of which diglossia is a major one, and the need to take serious measurements to find adequate solutions are indispensable.

Literature Review

Bilmamun (2021) states that the main reasons for adults' reluctance to read in the Arab World are due to many factors; mainly the lack of awareness of the importance of reading to build a good human being and the ignorance of the Arab person of the concept of self-education as reading is associated with schooling. Moreover, the educational system depends heavily on indoctrination that eventually generates an inability to develop one's free-reading. There is a lack of interest in reading among adults that leads, consequently, to the loss of a behavioural model the child can follow. In addition, most of the individuals in the Arab world are highly concerned to obtain their livelihood that reading, according to them, becomes a luxury. The prices of books are high that they are beyond the ability of the average-income individual. The spread of media and internet has overshadowed over reading; books are no longer the means of obtaining knowledge as there are ready made websites instantly offer all different information needed. Diglossia in Bilmamun's study (ibid.) has not been mentioned as one of the critical reasons behind the Arab individual's disinclination to reading. Reading, to most of the Arab families, is not considered as a cultural habit that forms an essential part of one's everyday routine.

Most formal education in the Arab World starts at the age of six. It is a critical time for the child; not only would the child miss the warmth of the family during the schooling time, but also would meet new people (teachers) speaking a new language. Though textbooks are published in Modern Standard Arabic, the instruction of the teachers tends to switch from Modern Standard Arabic to Vernacular or regional dialect to ensure that the pupil would understand most of the given material.

Poyas and Bawardi (2018: p.2) state that first grade teachers face major problems in teaching Arabic reading skills to children. They have identified three main features of the difficulty with learning to read Arabic as follows:

1. the diglossic nature of the language;
2. the perceptual burden of Arabic orthography;
3. and the complex relationship between graphemes and phonemes.

The three main features, mentioned above, that identify the difficulty with learning to read Arabic are entwined and each has a profound effect on child literacy.

Scholars (Maamouri, 1998; Eviatar and Ibrahim, 2014, Schiff and Saiegh-Haddad 2018) agree that there is a significant disparity exists between Standard Modern Arabic and the Vernacular Arabic or Dialect and it is manifested in the several linguistic domains: lexicon, phonology, syntax and grammar.

The lack of 'reading culture' in the Arab World, according to Gherwash (2017: 56) is 'due to an amalgamation of cultural and linguistic factors, among which is diglossia'. One of the researcher's questions was on the effect of diglossia on the participants' acquisition of reading. She stated that all the four participants in her study were exposed to vernacular Arabic and that their first encounter with the language was via oral storytelling by parents and grandparents in which the focus was mainly on passing along community traditions and wisdom. In addition, religious stories were told to introduce and instil religious values.

Gherwash (ibid.p.70) added that two of the participants were exposed to watching television programmes; i.e., *Sesame Street* in its Arabic version, which was their first exposure to Modern Standard Arabic afore going to school. They thought it eased their language learning acquisition later in school.

Shendy (2022) regards diglossia as having a great effect on child literacy. She states that it has a negative impact on 'phonological awareness, morphological awareness, phonological representation, word decoding, reading fluency, and letter naming'. She reviewed a number of textbooks for kindergarten-aged children in Egypt and found that only 40% of the words used are actually similar to those used in the Egyptian dialect. This is a suggestion that 60% of the words of the textbooks pose lexical, phonological, syntactic and grammatical problems to the child. Shendy (ibid.) stressed the urgent need to compose a model of Arabic education in the Arab World that deals with the critical state of the Arab child's literacy and the challenges that are posed by Arabic diglossia.

Abu-Rabia (2000) studied the effect of the exposure to literary Arabic on reading comprehension in a situation where two languages are used. The study involved 282 children, with 135 from grade 1 and 147 from grade 2. The participants were divided into two groups. The experimental group, consisting of 138 participants, was exposed to spoken Arabic during that period. Both groups were tested for reading comprehension at the end of grade 1 and grade 2 and compared with the control group. The results of the study indicated better reading comprehension results for the children who were exposed to literary Arabic during the preschool period can enhance reading comprehension in a diglossic situation, Saiegh-Haddad and Spolsky (2014) discussed the challenges and prospects of acquiring literacy in a diglossic context. The study revealed that the process of acquiring literacy in a diglossic context can be complex and requires careful management on the part of the parents and the school.

It is observed, though they are not sold in the Libyan market, that there are children's books written in regional dialects in Arabic whose publishers claim that they aim to cater to the specific needs and interests of children in those regions, and that those books can contribute to the preservation and promotion of regional dialects. Al Salwa Books from Jordan, is one example of a leading publisher house who has published hundreds of books in Jordanian regional dialect, and has won awards both regionally and internationally.

There is a controversy between education decision's makers over whether it is better for the child to be taught Modern Standard Arabic without the use of the dialect language or to help the child to bridge between the two forms of the Arabic language by the use of the dialect language. For the former group, it regards publishing books in regional dialects would be detrimental and, moreover focussing on Modern Standard Arabic is crucial for maintaining the identity of the Arabic language. The latter group regards publishing in dialect language as a means to instil love of reading by providing inspiring, accessible and diverse stories.

Methodology

This research aims to shed light on the efficacy of reading Arabic children's stories by the child to overcome the linguistic phenomena of diglossia of the Arabic language. The qualitative analytical research method was employed by which four Arabic children stories written in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) were examined. They were chosen randomly from the Libyan book stores, which are extensively underprivileged in Libyan children's books. The stories are addressed to the age group of seven to nine years old and they are published in Egypt. It is worth mentioning that one of the advantages of Modern Standard Arabic language is that it is legible by all Arabs.

A wordlist of Modern Standard Arabic words, which were beyond the child comprehension were selected and put into tables, with each word accompanied by its transcription, the word in the Libyan Tripolitanian dialect, its transcription, and finally the translation of the word into English. They were presented to show the diverse variance between them, and hence; the urgent necessity to handle and address the diglossia phenomenon is highlighted.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Arabic Stories

1. أرنب والجزرة

The Rabbit and the Carrot

Transcription	Libyan Dialect	Transcription	MSA	Translation
/ɪsfɪnæɪrɪə/	سفنارية	/ʒæzərə/	جزرة	a carrot
/ɪtlə/	طلع	/Kha:rə:ʒə/	خرج	went
/hʌndaʊ(ə)ʀ/	حنطور	/sæ'æbhæə/	سأبحث	I will find
/ɪfwæɪ/	اشوال	/æɪʒæwæɪ/	الجوال	the sack

2. الخريت الغاضب

The Angry Rhinoceros

Transcription	Libyan Dialect	Transcription	MSA	Translation
/wæhɪ:d æɪ kʌrn/	وحيد القرن	/æɪkhɪrɪ:t/	الخرتيت	rhinoceros
/ɪlʌhmʌg/	الحمق	/æɪghə'dʌb/	الغضب	anger
/ʒæj/	جاي	/kɑ:dɪm/	قادم	coming
/bɪ'kʊə/	بقوة	/bɪ'ʃɪdæ/	بشدة	mightily
/hə'mɪgnɪ/	حمقني	/ægh'dəbənɪ/	أغضبني	make me angry
/ə'ræk/	عراك	/ɪ'ʒə:(r)/	شجار	a quarrel
/də'rʌr/	ضرر	/ɪ'dæ/	إيذاء	harming
/ʒə/	جي	/ʌk'bæɪə/	أقبل	to come
/tʌg/	طق	/tə:'rə:kə:/	طرق	to knock

3. الكنغر الصغير

The Little Kangaroo

Transcription	Libyan Dialect	Transcription	MSA	Translation
/ʃʌ'də/	شَدَّ	/sʌ'də/	صَدَّ	fend off
/nægiʒ/	نَقِرْ	/kə'fəzə/	قفز	jump
/nʌgzə/	نقزة	/kʌfzə/	قفزة	a leap
/ɪd'rʌb bɪ rɪʒlæh/	ضرب برجله	/ræ'kælə/	ركل	kick

4. بيت فلنول

Fulfull's House

Transcription	Libyan Dialect	Transcription	MSA	Translation
/ælgædʊ:mæ/	القادومة	/ælmɪtrə:kə:/	المطرقة	hammer
/mæ ɪjsɪdk/	ما يسدك	/mæ jʌkfr:k/	ما يكفيك	this is enough

Exposing children to MSA at an early age is essential if the language is to be ingrained. Although reading stories is one of the most effective means of learning a language, reading, to the Arab child poses a great challenge because of the Arabic language diglossic nature.

From the analysis of the data, it is evident that most of the lexicon is significantly easy for the child to grasp. Much effort was put by the writer to choose a suitable vocabulary. Simple as it could possibly be, yet there is still some lexicon which the writer is obliged to use because there are no other simple straightforward words available.

In *The Rabbit and the Carrot*, the writer tended to repeat the challenging word a few times so that the child can understand it from the context. Moreover, the visual aids used are utilised to focus on the problematic word. It is remarkable that the word 'carrot' was mentioned thirteen times allowing the child to learn the word in the singular feminine form, plural muscular, plural feminine and the dual as follows:

الجزرة singular feminine
الجزر plural muscular
الجزرات plural feminine
جزرتين dual form

The writer heavily depended on pictures to explain words that are expected to be problematic to the child. Hence by the end of the story the child gained some new lexicon in MSA that were added to his/her linguistic knowledge. The verb 'went' and 'will find' are explained via pictures, where the rabbit is portrayed in front of the house and carrying the carrot to find its owner.

In *The Angry Rhinoceros* feelings of anger, bewilderment, calmness and remorse are expressed and visualised for the child through pictures. This gives the child the opportunity to understand some of the difficult lexicon. The angry rhinoceros, the calm donkey, the surprised kangaroo and the informative fox collectively, through the pictures, serve to explain the quite number of MSA words found in the story.

In *The Little Kangaroo* simple lexicon is used throughout the story. Attention is given to verbs of movement as the story is about animals that played a football match, and there was a quarrel about the demand of each team to have the kangaroo as its goalkeeper. Pictures are employed to show the different verbs of movement mentioned in the story so as to explain the verbs in MSA as the Dialect ones are totally unrelated.

The story, *Fulfull's House* does not pose a strain to the Libyan child lexicon knowledge as the writer's choice of words tends to be simple, moreover; the structure is selected with extra care to meet the needs of a child with a limited linguistic vocabulary in MSA. The substantial variability between the MSA and the Libyan dialect is given extra attention. The word "مطرقة", "hammer" is explained through the picture employed in the first page to clarify the variation between the MSA and the Libyan dialect. Similarly, the structure, "يكفيك لا", "not enough for

you”, is explained instantly with “إنه صغير عليك” to illuminate the child with a new structure that could be added to his/her lexical ability.

Conclusions

The research examined the use of children's books to mitigate the diglossic linguistic phenomenon in Tripoli, Libya. Diglossia is the linguistic phenomenon where there is a difference, a gap, between the formal language of communication (for example, used in books, newspapers, or official statements) and everyday dialect. In this case, the study focuses on the difference between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the Libyan Tripolitania Dialect.

The researcher had chosen four Arabic children's stories randomly which were written in MSA. They were examined to identify problematic lexicons that children might face due to the vast difference between MSA language and the Libyan Tripolitania Dialect. The words were selected and put into tables, with each word accompanied by its transcription, the word in the Libyan dialect, its transcription, and finally the translation of the word into English.

The research has found that the stories were written in a simple language suitable for the age group of seven to nine. The author gave special attention to the lexicons that might pose a challenge to the child, simplifying them and using repetition to explain and teach the new lexicons. Pictures were also used to clarify some of the ambiguous words. Diglossia phenomenon affects the entire Arab world; therefore; tremendous joint efforts among the Arab countries have to be placed in this aspect. Strategies to bridge the gap between MSA and regional dialects, such as maximizing early exposure to MSA through stories, songs, or cartoons are highly essential. Moreover, governments' aid to make children's books accessible to every child has to be a principal target. This could be maintained by finding public libraries, where children's books' section holds a substantial number of books that covers all aspects of knowledge; educational and entertaining.

Additionally, e-books could be an alternative to traditional paper books; they could help schools to offer more reading hours to a number of

Mouzughi, Children's Books as a Bridge to Overcome

pupils. E-books can include interactive features like illustrations, animations, and games that can help children learn new words and expand their vocabulary. Furthermore, they can support the development

of children's phonological awareness, vocabulary development, spelling development and reading comprehension.

The research has concluded that the four stories analyzed, though the data is rather limited, have put the teaching of MSA as one of its first priorities, yet they demonstrated being amusing and entertaining against the claim made by some of the decision education makers that publishing in the dialect language is a means to instil love of reading by providing inspiring, accessible and diverse stories.

It is worth noting that the research's findings could be beneficial for the education system in Libya, especially given the current challenges with the State education system. The use of children's books in teaching MSA could potentially be a practical and effective method to mitigate the diglossic phenomenon in the entire region.

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Mouzughi, Children's Books as a Bridge to Overcome

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