

## DIFFICULTIES OF READING ARABIC AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

SHABAN, ALI ALI

Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt

### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the problems associated with reading Arabic as a foreign language. Any researcher in the field of teaching Arabic as a foreign language must have noticed that learners of Arabic face some problems that lead to hindering or slowing down their progress in reading as a language skill. Anderson (1999) defines reading as an active, fluent process which involves the reader and the reading material in building meaning. Meaning does not reside on the printed pages nor is it only in the reader. In the same direction, Urquhart & Weir see reading as a process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language form via the medium of print (1988, p. 22). It means that the role of the shape of the print is crucial in facilitating or hindering the reader's progress. This paper tried to pinpoint the difficulties that face non-native Arabic learners, and the different factors pertaining to those problems.

An empirical tool, to be described below, was used to achieve the objectives of this paper. Despite the fact that a lot of work has been done on this area of study, the overwhelming majority of the findings of this paper were not shown or mentioned in earlier works. The scope of this study covered the orthographic, phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and contextual factors that shaped the accuracy, fluency, and comprehension of the texts read by the students participating in this study. The results showed that there are some areas in the Arabic language that posed real challenge to the reader; (1) Determining the correct vowel that goes with second consonants of the verb-root. (2) Determining the correct vowel that goes with the tense-subject morpheme of the present tense. (3) The grammatical case endings of verbs and nouns according to the grammatical function they carry in the sentence. This paper is organized as follows. Section 1 introduces some basic discussion and related work. Section 2 is devoted to the main research point and section 3 introduces the conclusion of the paper.

**KEYWORDS:** Foreign Language, Language Economy, Reading Comprehension

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### General Introduction, Background, and Related Work

There has been a growing interest in teaching and learning Arabic as a second or a foreign language all over the world. A great deal of research relating to this subject matter was published in different periodicals. Reading, as a language skill, has captured the attention of workers and researchers in the field of teaching foreign languages long time ago. For example, Ching Yin Leung (2002), Mokhtari, K, and Reichard, C (2002), Frances H Mecarty (2000), and Abu-Laiel reported different types of reading difficulties in Japanese, English, Spanish, and Arabic respectively. Their works examined different participants in different levels of education.

In the last twenty years or so, a good deal of attention has been given to investigating the problems pertaining to reading in Arabic. In fact, reading in Arabic is intrinsically different from reading in most other languages. This is due to the fact that Arabic is a member of the Semitic family, which has some special calligraphic characteristics.

Arabic has a special alphabetical system. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, (Arabic translation, 1985, p. 52), Ferdinand de Saussure maintains that the Greek alphabet is the origin of all other alphabets, whereas Columns, F. (1993, p. 314) sees that the Phoenician alphabet is the alphabet from which the Greek and other alphabets originated. However, the Greek and Phoenician alphabets differ in many respects, the most relevant of which is vowelization. The Greek from the very beginning used a writing system that represents all the sounds of any given word; consonants and vowels, whereas the Phoenician and Semitic languages neglected writing the vowels, and recorded the consonants only in their writing system.

The early establishment of the Arabic writing system was not divergent, in most of its details, from the early establishment of the Semitic writing systems in general, that is, the southern Arabic alphabet, known as *Al-Musnad*, which is the representative of the earlier stage of the Arabic alphabet, was void of any symbol that refers to vowel sounds, be they long or short. The northern Arabic alphabet as well, originated from the Nabatean, was also void of reference to vowels. It is worth mentioning that the northern alphabet is the dominant Arabic system now, and on which many modifications were done (Abu-Eid, 2009).

The current Arabic alphabet comprises twenty eight letters, three of which are semi-vowels (ﻯ، ﻭ، ﺀ), as they can be used as consonants or vowels. In addition to these, Arabic has three short vowels, which are not normally represented by letters, but by diacritics that are placed above or beneath the written letters, they are called Fatha; short vowel "a", Kasrah; short vowel "i", and Dhammah; short vowel "u". These diacritics are not normally represented in the written form of Arabic language except for pedagogical purposes or for religious scriptures, especially the Qur'an.

The phonological representation of the Arabic alphabet is one to one correspondence, that is, each grapheme has only one phonological value, and each sound has only one grapheme. Juxtaposition of certain graphemes yields a phonological phenomenon called 'germination', the most common example of it happens when the definite article "al" is prefixed to nouns beginning with one of a closed set of sounds (14 sounds) known as "sun sounds". The sound "l" of the definite article becomes identical to the adjacent "sun sound" and gets geminated to it.

This brief presentation of the Arabic writing system has been indispensable as reading in its essence heavily rests on recognizing and decoding the written symbols of the written language. The first thing that faces the language learner is reading. Reading in its essence is a complex of mental processes that aim at deciphering the written symbols, rendering them into phonological values, and extracting a meaning out of them. It is axiomatic that the relationship between letter, sound, and meaning is arbitrary, as there is no logical connection between the shape of the letter and its phonological value, neither between the total sum of the phonological components of a given word and its meaning. During this process the reader endeavors to build a mental image of the words he is reading (Al'ayed, S., 1995, p. 8).

Reading in Arabic requires more cognitive demand, and mental processes for associating a written symbol to its phonological representation, as the Arabic alphabet employs a considerable number of extremely similar symbols; the only way of distinguishing between them is by placing a dot or more above or beneath the symbol. Moreover, some of them have different forms according to their positional occurrence in the word; the most acute of them is the letter (ﻻ). And when the vowels that shape the final form of the word, and determines their grammatical relationships with other lexical items in a given utterance are absent, the cognitive demand for reading comprehension is certainly magnified.

Accurate reading in Arabic requires operating many cognitive processes; among them:

- Envisioning the symbols that constitute the word, and linking them to their appropriate phonological representations.
- Envisioning the appropriate form of the word. In this stage he/she is obliged to choose from a number of choices that may go up to five; each of them has many possible readings and many different interpretations. This is due to the fact that the absence of short vowels in Arabic made it a homographic language. So, the reader exerts more cognitive efforts, and applies many mental processes to decode and render the written symbols into sounds, then, infer their meanings. For example, the root *K T B*: to read, has five possible lexemes; *Kataba*: he wrote, *kutiba*: it was (has been) written, *Kattaba*: asked or forced to write, *kuttiba*: was asked (forced) to write, *kutub*: books, and *katb*: writing, or abdomen.
- Recognizing the morphological and morpho-phonological structure of the word.
- Realizing the grammatical relationships holding between the components of the sentence.
- Recalling the lexical meaning of those components, and inferring the proper contextual meaning of the whole utterance.

Some earlier researches were done to measure the effects of the absence of short vowels on reading comprehension in Arabic (Abu-Rabia, S. 2007; Abdulbari, M. 2011; Muhammad, F. 2011; Sartawi, Z. n.d.; Na'ima, W. 2012). These researches examined native dyslexic and normal speakers of Arabic, but this paper examines normal non-native learners of Arabic at the university level. The participants were the final semester, fourth year students of the Arabic language section in both Abai and Al-Farabi universities, Almaty, Kazakhstan. They comprised 12 students from Abai University, and 13 students from Al-Farabi University. Both groups studied Arabic as a major subject for eight semesters.

The measurement was designed to test the phonological, lexical, morphological, and grammatical knowledge of the students, and the impact of the knowledge of these factors on facilitating reading in Arabic. It comprised three paragraphs; ten lines each, on different topics. They were written without short vowels to reflect the normal Arabic printed material. The material was reader friendly, in the sense that the students studied them in earlier semesters, and was suitable to their level. (Anderson & Armbuster, 1982)

The students were asked to mark all the letters with the appropriate vowel markers according to their understanding of the texts. They were given enough time for considering the morphological structures of the words, their lexical meanings, and the grammatical function of each word so that they can decide the case-ending marker of each word. They were not allowed to receive any help from the invigilators or their colleagues. The next day, they were asked to voice record the same texts twice; once from a copy without the short vowels, the other from a vowelized copy. Voice recordings aimed at measuring the linguistic accuracy, and the fluency of the participants, as well as the seen reading strategies each of them used. Other strategies used by the participants were revealed when the results of scoring their answers were discussed with them. The discussion aimed also at verifying the students' knowledge, and explaining the discrepancies that were spotted between marking the written forms with vowel markers and the vowels they used in the oral recordings. In some cases, the vowels used by a given participant in the written form were different from those he/she used in the oral

recording. Rating the students was not an aim of this study. It only aimed at detecting the difficulties that non-native learners of Arabic face.

The rationale behind this measurement is that accuracy and fluency in reading Arabic as a foreign language reveals the student's degree of phonological accuracy, morphological awareness, lexical and contextual meanings, and the knowledge of the grammatical relationship holding between the lexical items in the sentence.

The results showed deficiencies at many linguistic levels; phonological, morphological, and grammatical. The phonological errors were detected from the voice recording, whereas, other errors were detected from voice recordings and the written papers.

The most common phonological errors can be grouped in: (1) The absence of the fricative dental sounds (ð), (θ), (z). (2) Misusing the stress patterns. (3) Inaccurate use of the definite article "Lam ashshamsiyya" (Normally known as "Sun Letters"). (4) Mixing between long and short vowels. (5) Mixing between Hamzat al-qatf (the pure glottal stop) and hamzayul - wasl (joining glottal stop).

The most recurrent morphological errors were represented by: (1) Word class (verb/noun/adjective/adverb distinction). (2) Derivation: Noun-adjective-adverb distinction. (3) Tense (Inability to use the correct vowel-marker with the tense-person exponent in the present tense verbs). This is well-related to the recognition of the verb root. (4) Determining the correct vowel that goes with the second consonant of the root in the present tense form. The most recurrent grammatical errors were acutely exemplified by: (1) The inability to use the correct the grammatical case-endings. (2) The inability to distinguish between normal nouns and mamnu' min as-sarf (diptote nouns).

## 2. THE RESEARCH POINT AND PROPOSED SOLUTION

The relationship between phonological awareness and reading ability has been tested in English and other languages, resulting in compelling evidence that an understanding of the phonological constituents of words is an important determiner of reading success in many other alphabetic orthographies besides English (Yopp, 1988; Treiman, 1992; Durgunoglu, Nagy & Anicia-Bhatt, 1993; MacBride-Chang, 1995, Abu-Rabia, S. 2007). Recognizing the letters and linking them to their phonological values did not seem to pose a major problem to the participants of this study. They showed stable ability to decode the written symbols and render them to recognizable sounds that did not hinder understanding them. But the fluency in reading was something else. Many of the participants took longer time than expected for achieving this transformation process.

The errors that occurred in the voice recordings were not prevailing in the rendering of the written characters, but in trying to guess the unseen components, i.e., the short vowels. Short vowels, in Arabic, decide the morphological form of the word, for example, kataba (verb: he wrote) versus kutub (plural noun: books), which, in turn, assigns a syntactic function to the word, and helps denoting the overall meaning of the utterance. This clearly shows that the correct guessing of the unseen short vowels leads to creating the ultimate phonological shape of the word. This is as a sub-reading skill in itself. Abu-Rabia, S. (2007. p. 93) noted that "The most important skill in phonological processing is the association of sounds with letters, that is, the understanding of grapheme-phoneme conversion rules and the exceptions to these rules". This remark does not tune well with the written unvowelized Arabic texts, since the process of grapheme-phoneme linkage without detecting the short vowels, is not sufficient to decode a written Arabic text. A major function of short vowels in

Arabic is assisting the reader to envision the final shape of the word, through providing him with the full information he/she needs to decode its morphological structure and its grammatical function (Abu-Leil, et Al. p. 28)

Accuracy at the phonological level cannot be achieved without guessing the correct short vowels. Abu-Rabia (1996) tested the role of vowels on reading accuracy in Arabic among highly skilled Arabic readers aged 17–18 years. The results indicated that vowels had a significant effect on the reading accuracy of poor and skilled readers in each reading condition. The same results hold for the non-native participants of this study, as accuracy was clearly manifested during reading the vowelized copy of the material. However, fluency was less noticeable than accuracy. Most of the participants stressed the fact that the vowel markers were an impediment to their normal fluency, as they are not used to it. This was really astonishing, as it was in full agreement with observation noted by for adult Arab readers (Abu-Leil, et. al., p. 28).

The reader reads the text and interprets its meaning by mentally providing the missing grammatical information (vocalization process) that leads to an acceptable interpretation. This amounts to an additional manual/human annotation with decisions that may have a non-trivial impact on the overall annotation routine in terms of both accuracy and speed (Maamouri, M. et.al. 2004).

Another acute observation was recorded about the stress patterns the students produced. Stress patterns of the students' mother tongue, which they transferred to the target language played an unmistakable role in diverting the phonological shape of some words, especially those which tend to bear the stress on the first or second syllables. The Kazak language tends to place the stress on the final syllable.

The factor of guessing was clearly manifested strategy in deciding the grammatical case ending. The word order the students of Arabic are familiar with is verb + subject + object (or any other complement). When the lexical meaning or the grammatical feature (such as transitive/intransitive) of the verb, is absent, guessing plays a major role in choosing the case ending of the following nouns. For example, in the sentence:

وايضا نكب البرامكة ما كان من ظلمهم واستبدادهم

*What afflicted the Barmakids with disasters is the injustice and tyranny they prevailed.*

The verb *nakaba* (*afflicted with disaster*) was unfamiliar to most of the participants, so, they attributed the function of the subject to following word *al-baramikah* (*the Barmakids*), whereas it is the object, not the subject, of the verb. This strategy of *Analogy* to the normal Arabic word order was recurrent in the students' answer. But the case was a complete chaos when the sentence involved two animate or inanimate words representing the function of subject/object or a genitive structure in the sentence. This happens when the lexical meaning is absent. The dichotomy animate/inanimate is a crucial clue for deciding the grammatical functions of the sentence components.

Accurate reading requires producing the grammatical case endings that is governed by the grammatical relationship holding between the constituents of the sentence. This, on the other hand, requires that the reader should understand or be familiar with the meaning of the lexical items of the sentence. The dilemma is that, one can produce a correct and accurate reading in most of the languages we know so long as he can link the written symbols to their phonological values. This is due to the fact that consonants and vowels are represented in the data he is dealing with. But in Arabic, where short vowels are missing, this mental or cognitive process of rendering written symbols into sounds is

not enough for producing accurate reading. Intensive lexical familiarity, doubled with a high skill to choose from many possible homographs, and a sound knowledge of Arabic grammar is an indispensable factor for accurate reading.

How can a curriculum provide for all of these factors at the Asian university level? Day & Bamford (2002) advocated the ten principles presented by Williams, Ray in 1986 for teaching reading, which he called "Extensive reading", as a remedy for this prevailing problem. These principles were meant to be guide lines to teachers to help their students make up for the limited time assigned to reading in curricula, the absence of interesting texts in school books, and to encourage the students to choose what they want to read. This is an alternative put forward for improving the reading skills, enhancing the students' feelings towards the language they learn, and creating a taste and sense in the language.

Unfortunately, these principles do not tune well with the Arabic language and the Asian context in which we work. It does not tune well with Arabic as reading in Arabic always needs guidance from the teacher on deciding the necessary short vowels, otherwise, the student will possibly acquire the wrong form the words, which might be incurable in the future. The only alternative is to provide vowelized texts for extensive reading, which entails a heavy financial burden. On the other hand, it does not tune well with the Asian context, as Thomas Robb denotes, "in institutionalized settings in many parts of Asia, where the priorities of the students favor extra curricular activities, such as, part-time jobs, clubs and social life, over learning, simple encouragement will not be effective with a large number, and perhaps the majority, of one's students" (Robb, T. 2002). This exactly holds for the Central Asian context, where social life, and part-time jobs are prior to any thing else in a student's life. Another proposal was set forth by Palinscar. A. S. et al, (1984, p. 168) for engulfing the gap of learners' weakness in reading. She calls it "The reciprocal teaching method", and maintains that it could be the prime reason for success. She quotes some reasons for supporting her proposal. First, it involves extensive modeling of the type of comprehension fostering and comprehension-monitoring activities that are usually difficult to detect in the expert reader, as they are executed covertly. The reciprocal teaching procedure provides a relatively natural forum for the teacher to engage in these activities overtly and hence to provide a model of what it is that expert readers do when they try to understand and remember texts. Second, the reciprocal teaching routines force the students to respond, even if the level of which they are capable is not yet that of an expert.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The reciprocal teaching procedure involves continuous trial and error on the part of the student, married to continuous adjustment on the part of the teacher to their current competence. This method sounds suitable for the Arabic teaching context. It prompts mutual reading activities between the students and teachers, which, in turn, Leads to guiding the students to achieve useful rounds of fruitful teaching, and acquiring the sound phonological performance on the students' part.

### REFERENCES

1. Abu-Eid, M. A. (2009). Pragmatics of Arabic writing: A study in language economy. Faculty of Erbid, University of Balqaa, Jordan.
2. Abu-Laiel, A. K. and D. L. Share, and R. Ibrahim, ([www.uv.es/revispsi/preprints/Abu-Laiel.pdf](http://www.uv.es/revispsi/preprints/Abu-Laiel.pdf), accessed on 11/01/2014)

3. Abu-Rabia, S. (2007). The role of morphology and short vowelization in reading Arabic among normal and dyslexic readers in grades 3, 6, 9, and 12. *Journal of Psychology research*. Vol. 36. pp. 89-106.
4. Al-'ayed, S. (1995). Loud reading between reality and ambitions. Symposium of language weakness at the university level, Faculty of Arabic Language, Imam Muhammad bin Saud University, Riyadh, KSA
5. Anderson, N. J. (1999). *Exploring second language reading: Issues and Strategies*. Boston,, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
6. Anderson, R. C. & Pearson, P. D. (1984). A scheme-theoretic view of basic processes in reading in R. Barr, M. L. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 2, pp. 255-292). White Plains. NY: Longman.
7. Anderson, T. H., & Armbruster, B. B. (1982). Studying. In P. D. Pearson (Ed.), *Handbook of reading research*. New York: Longman.
8. Baker, L., & Brown, A. L. (1984). Metacognitive skills and reading. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 2, pp. 353–394). White Plains, NY: Longman.
9. Bamford, J. & Day, R. R. (eds). (2003). *Extensive reading activities for teaching language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
10. Ching Yin Leung (2002), Extensive reading and language learning: A diary study of a beginning learner of Japanese, *Reading in a foreign language*, Vol. 14, No. 1.
11. Day, R. R. and Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
12. Day, R. R. and Bamford, J. (2002). Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, Vol. 14 No. 2
13. Day, R. R. and J. Bamford. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
14. Day, R. R. and J. Bamford. (2002). Top ten principles for teaching extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language* 14/2. <http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/October2002/>
15. Florian Coulmas (Jan 1993). *Language and Economy* Blackwell
16. Frances H. Mecarty (2000), Lexical and grammatical knowledge in reading and listening comprehension by foreign language learners of Spanish. *Applied Language Learning*. Vol. 11, No. 2. pp. 323-348.
17. Guthrie, J., & Wig field, A. (1999). How motivation fits into a science of reading. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 3, 199–205.
18. Hu, M. & Nation, P. (2000). Unknown vocabulary density and reading comprehension. *Reading in a Foreign Language*. 13(1), 403-430.
19. Maamouri, M. and A. Bies, T. Buckwalter, W. Mekki. (n. d.) *The Penn Arabic Treebank: Building a large-scale annotated Arabic corpus*. Linguistic data consortium, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104 USA.

20. Mokhtari, K., and Reichard, C. (2002), *Journal of Educational Psychology* Vol. 94, No. 2, 249–259
21. Na'ima, W., et.al. (2012) Lack of attention and over-dynamism and their relation to dyslexia, an empirical study. Faculty of Education, King Saud University, Riyadh. KSA.
22. Nuttall, C. (1996). *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) Oxford: Heinemann.
23. Ong, Walter J. (2002). *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (2nd ed) New York: Rout ledge.
24. Palinscar, A. S. et Al. (1984). Reciprocal teaching of comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring activities. *Cognition and Instruction*, 1 (2), 117-175.
25. Salih, Q. and M. Shawush, M. Ajinah (Translators). (1985): *A Course in General Linguistics*; de Saussure, F.
26. Tae Ueta (2005). *Teaching reading. English for International Students*. University of Birmingham.
27. Urquhart, S. and Weir, C. (1998). *Reading in a second language: Process, Product, and Oractice*. London: Longman.
28. Williams, R. (1986). "Top ten" principles for teaching reading. *ELT Journal*, 40(1), 42-45.