THE ISSUE OF PUPILS' EXPOSURE TO MODERN STANDARD ARABIC IN A DIGLOSSIC CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The present paper investigates effects of exposure to Modern Standard Arabic in the learning process in a diglossic situation among first grade pupils in two school settings, the aim being to demonstrate differences between them. Recently, clear deficiencies seem to have been noted in pupils' linguistic skills in Arab schools, particularly in first grade level, since most of them have relatively little or no contact with the official language of instruction before formal schooling. Children acquire a colloquial form of Arabic as a mother tongue, while Literary Arabic or MSA is learnt later on through access to formal instruction. The pupils' educational problems and the persistent feelings of linguistic insecurity are therefore directly attributed to the diglossia phenomenon. By means of a questionnaire and interview paradigms, the results of this study provide insight into the main language difficulties that pupils encounter in classroom interaction. The research shows that the pupils in one of the two schools are far better prepared for formal instruction and thus perform better in MSA than those of the other school because the former have gone through a one-year pre-school formation. What is suggested is that a systematic exposure to MSA uses two or three years before school age will be of great benefit to the learner.

KEYWORDS: Diglossia, MSA, Dialectal Arabic, Learning Process

INTRODUCTION

The present study highlights effects of Arab pupils' exposure to Modern Standard Arabic in their learning strategies in a diglossic situation. Arabic is considered a *diglossic* case whereby colloquial Arabic differs significantly from standard Arabic (Ayari1996). In fact, one of the most important issues that characterize Arab formal education in general and that of Algeria in particular, is that the language that is prescribed in the official text as the language of instruction differs from the pupils' mother tongue namely in vocabulary, phonology, grammar and syntax. Some sociolinguists like Maamouri (1998) attributethe low quality results of education in the Arab world to the diglossic situation in classrooms and to the linguistic distance between Modern Standard Arabic and the different colloquial forms.

This study compares between two school settings as regards Modern Standard Arabic use by first grade pupils. In parallel, it indicates the impact of Arabic diglossia on pupils' linguistic proficiency in Modern standard Arabic use in classroom interaction.

Arabic Diglossia

From a sociolinguistic perspective, diglossia is a typical characteristic of the twenty two countries in which Arabic is an official language. The high variety, MSA also known as *'al-fusha'*, Standard Arabic or Literary Arabic which is a

modern descendant from Classical Arabic (the language of Qur'an, the holy book of Islam) is used in education, administration, literature, and for formal speech functions such as religious sermons and broadcasts. This variety which is shared by all communities alternates with the low variety, also called 'al 'ammiya' (meaning the common) commonly used for everyday conversation and folk literature.

In diglossic contexts, speakers usually perceive the high variety as the 'real' language, more prestigious, more beautiful and more logical by contrast to the low variety, commonly viewed as less prestigious, 'impure', or 'incorrect' usage. In Arabic, people talk about the high variety as being 'pure' Arabic and the dialects as being 'corrupt' forms. In Haeri's (2003:43) terms, Classical Arabic is perceived as a "language whose aesthetic and musical qualities move its listeners, creating feelings of spirituality, nostalgia and community". To this, he adds that CA "socialized people into rituals of Islam, affirms their identity as Muslims and connects them to the realm of purity, morality and God" (Ibid).

A non- linguistic characteristic of Arabic diglossia is that the high variety is learned through formal education, contrary to the low variety which is acquired naturally from birth. The high variety possesses an established norm for grammar, orthography, pronunciation, and vocabulary by contrast to the low variety which lacks a written grammar.

More recently, heated discussions have developed over the use of the term 'Arabic diglossia'. Indeed, Ferguson's classical version that diglossia is "two varieties of a language exist[ing] side by side … with each having a definite role to play" (1959: 325) should be re-evaluated through the use of the term 'Arabic multiglossia' since more than two varieties of Arabic come at play. The coalescence between CA and colloquial Arabic seems to pave the way to the creation of a new variety of Arabic known as *the middle variety* used in semi-formal situations. This is the main reason why diglossia in the Arab world is suggested to be rather a multiglossia. Mahmoud (1986: 239) says in this respect: "the emergence of a new, intermediate form of Arabic called Educated Spoken Arabic is commonly cited as evidence that the diglossic situation is undergoing a dramatic change (Abdel-Masiih, 1975; Bishai, 1966; Mahmoud 1984, 1962)."

Essentially, MSA, Educated Spoken Arabic and colloquial Arabic constitute a continuum from which, native speakers may select the available variety at different times and occasions. In fact, Ferguson himself acknowledges that Arabic diglossic contexts are evolving towards a type of continuum when he (1970) claims that "Intermediate between the two varieties, relatively 'pure' Classical and Colloquial, there are many shadings of 'middle language'". It is therefore safely claimed that there are various varieties of Arabic and ESA is successfully bridging the gap between varieties for the elite. Diglossia is not an unchanging, stable phenomenon as it may have appeared to Ferguson, and ESA is a definite harbinger of change in the Arabic speech community since it seems to be bridging successfully the gap between the two forms of Arabic and increasingly satisfying the communicative needs of its elite (Mahmoud, 1986:247).

Therefore, according to Mahmoud (1986), the impact of ESA has been most noticeable in the teaching and learning processes of the Arabic language. The Arab child, for instance, will be exposed for the first time to a language not too far removed from his mother tongue.

Diglossia and Education

Some Arab educational specialists are fully aware that the low educational achievement and literacy rates in most Arab communities are mostly due to the diglossic situation of the Arabic language. In a diglossic context, there is a co-existence of two language varieties, and in the specific case of Arabic, one variety is used for ordinary conversation and the other is learnt by means of formal education and it is generally used for written and educational purposes.

However, many researchers proclaim that this sociolinguistic issue delays literacy acquisition because of a lack of clear relation between speech and literacy (Abu Rabia 2000; Saeigh Haddad 2003). According to Maamouri (1998), the widespread functional illiteracy in the Arab world is due to diglossia which has a negative impact on the ability of Arab children to acquire Arabic reading and writing skills, and consequently on their academic attainment in general.

Generally speaking, Arab pupils are required to suppress most of their habitual speech while trying to acquire a new set of rules once in contact with school. However, the mixture of Arabic linguistic patterns seems to lead to serious pedagogical problems, in addition to a kind of feeling of linguistic insecurity during classroom interaction among a high number of young Arab pupils. Maamouri (1998:40) explains that: "this lack of security comes from a general feeling of low understanding of modern fusha and of low identification of its norms".

The Arabic language represents a perfect model of both cultural and religious diglossia which may include the choice of the prestigious variety for formal settings such as the school. Consequently, this may have various effects on the child's school experience. On the one hand, parents expect their child to be taught the prestigious variety at school and teachers set the classwork to accomplish this parental purpose on the other. Hence, in this situation, children are not at all encouraged to make enquiry and discovery, but rather "the learner is forced to emphasize form rather than content; embellishment rather than essence; imitative ability rather than creativity" (Al Rabaa, 1986: 74).

Something else worth mentioning is that the exclusive use of the 'official' language of instruction inside Arab classrooms seems to lead to two conflicting practices. First, teachers intentionally try to neglect the colloquial forms used by pupils. Secondly, those teachers are obliged to use the colloquial forms to communicate easier with their pupils. Moreover, The intermingling of fushas and colloquial forms in the Arab region and the lack of clear-cut linguistic marking barriers aggravate the insecurity of the young learners who seem confused by what constitutes fusha in the Arabic forms which surround them and what does not (Maamouri, 1998: 40-41).

As a matter of fact, some sociolinguists attribute the low achievements of education in the Arab schools to the diglossic situation inside classrooms and the linguistic distance between MSA and the different forms of colloquial Arabic. MSA is never acquired as a mother tongue from birth, but is generally learnt through formal instruction.

Generally, all the colloquial forms of Arabic are linguistically related to MSA. Yet, this linguistic relatedness is 'flexible' and 'changeable' (Kaye, 1972). In a focus on the phonological distance between Standard Arabic and Spoken Arabic, Maamouri (1998) mentions that although Standard Arabic shares most of the phonemes with all Spoken vernaculars, no single Spoken Arabic vernacular has the same set of phonemes as Standard Arabic. For instance, the voiced, voiceless and emphatic consonants present in MSA, /I/, /ẟ/ and/ẟ/ do not appear in vernaculars of Algerians. For example, the word /ẟaheb/ in MSA, meaning 'gold' in English, becomes /dh★b/ in Algerian Arabic (AA henceforth).

Arab school children are taught the standard form of Arabic, although their mother tongue is spoken Arabic. MSA is distinct from colloquial Arabic in phonology, vocabulary, grammar and syntax, which means that these children are confronted to a variety of Arabic with which they have relatively little contact. Zughoul (1980: 202) concludes that: "The diglossic situation is indeed problematic for a linguistic community. It is considered to be a hindrance to educational and economic development, as well as a national coherence".

Exposure of Arab Pupils to Modern Standard Arabic

One important issue that characterizes Arab formal education, as already mentioned, is that the language of

instruction differs significantly from pupils' mother tongue. It is obvious that all Arab parents use the colloquial forms of Arabic when conversing with their off spring at home, and therefore MSA is no one's mother tongue and it is almost never used in day-to-day communication, while the text books in schools are based on the literary language. Consequently, Arab children first encounter MSA in schools. Outside the school milieu, their exposure to MSA is confined to educational and TV programmes such as cartoons and documentaries, or literary events depending on the environment to which the child belongs. In addition, children hear their parents pray in CA and their siblings do their homework in MSA.

Abu- Rabia (2000), a prominent Arab scholar proposed that reading complexities in elementary schools are attributed to Arabic diglossia for, the language used as a medium of instruction differs from the colloquial forms used at home. In his study, Abu- Rabia compared the performance of reading comprehension between first and second grade children who had been experimentally exposed to MSA throughout their preschool period. He found that early exposure of Arab preschool children to MSA may improve their performance in reading comprehension tests two years later. In this view, Abu-Rabia (2000: 149) says that: "reading skills in the early years of a child's life are essential for the acquisition of knowledge in later schooling." He (ibid: 155) continued by suggesting that:

- Policy makers may incorporate this pedagogy in all preschool years as part of the curriculum.

- Educating elementary school teachers and kindergarten teachers in diglossic issues and,

- The recommendation that teachers at all levels use literary Arabic as the language of instruction.

Another investigation concerning the performance of kindergarten and first grade pupils on phonemic awareness tasks was done by Saiegh Haddad (2003) who noticed that when the phoneme was standard and embedded in a standard word syllabic structure, the initial phoneme's isolation was a hard task mainly for kindergarten children. This is due to limited exposure and practice with standard Arabic phonemes.

The mixture of literary and spoken patterns inside Arab classrooms enhances the insecurity of young pupils who seem confused by what constitutes the standard form of Arabic and what does not. Sometimes, pupils borrow colloquial forms to fill in lexical or grammatical gaps because they lack knowledge in MSA. For Maamouri (1998:41): The situation is more complex in the Maghreb where the same needs lead to the incursion of local colloquial forms, French-based borrowings, but also interdialectal borrowings coming from the Arabic colloquials which are brought into their learning environment by an important movie presence from Egypt and Syria.

Essentially, the involvement of parents in educating their children is of crucial importance. According to Maamouri (1998), it is important for parents to read to their children early and often in order to improve their reading skill. He also believes that illiterate parents constitute a serious obstacle to the creation of an early literate environment for a young child. In the same vein, Abu-Rabia (2012: 2) asserts that "there is a widespread agreement that joint parent-preschooler reading is a highly beneficial parental practice that promotes the acquisition of literacy-related knowledge and, consequently, paves the way for successful achievement".

He (ibid) also suggests that if parents read to their children at an early stage on purpose and in a pleasurable atmosphere, reading process becomes a more natural effective means of promoting literacy acquisition than are more traditional curricula.

The present study investigates effects of young pupils' exposure to literary Arabic in the learning process in a

situation of diglossia in first grade level. It tries to compare between pupils who study in two distinct primary schools, the aim being to show the principal language difficulties that pupils encounter when interacting with their teachers.

It is assumed in this study that pupils who were exposed to literary Arabic early demonstrate better proficiency in MSA use in classroom interaction and have more chance for success than the pupils whose exposure to literary Arabic is reduced or totally absent before formal instruction.

METHOD

As the present study aims at investigating the issue of young pupils' exposure to literary Arabic in a diglossic situation, the first grade level is taken as a case in point and the sample population consists of two groups of respondents: First grade pupils as well as teachers of the Arabic course. The sample population has been selected from two different primary schools (PS henceforth) with the aim of demonstrating the difference between them. The first one is called *Ibn Msaib* and the second one is *Mustapha Chiali*. The sample population includes 62 pupils and 6 teachers; 32 pupils and 4 teachers were chosen from *Ibn Msaib* PS, and 30 pupils and 2 teachers from *Mustapha Chiali* PS. The high rate of the pupils' group in comparison to the small rate of teachers relates to the fact that the present research work focuses mainly on the impact of Arabic diglossia on learning rather than on teaching MSA. Apart from this, the teachers' group was chosen on purpose as in *Ibn Msaib* primary school, there are four classes of first grade level and, thus the teachers' group includes four persons, while in *Mustapha Chiali* PS the selected group is composed of solely two teachers for the simple reason that there are only two first grade level classes. One particular issue that relates to the field work is that the pupils require careful attention and consideration on the part of the researcher since their age does not go beyond seven.

The data expected in this study are mainly obtained by means of a questionnaire and an interview that have been administered to both groups (pupils and teachers) from the two primary schools with the aim of eliciting data explicitly from the informants. Pupils from both primary schools were divided into three groups of 10 children, to the exception of one group at *Ibn Msaib* primary school which was composed of 12 pupils. The learners were interviewed on the basis of simple questions. Some of them were close-ended questions and others open-ended ones. The questionnaire for pupils was oriented to get answers for questions like 'By which variety of Arabic can you express yourself better?', 'Is it easy to learn MSA? and 'How well do you speak MSA?'

The interview held with teachers was rather unstructured with unpredictable answers with the aim of finding out more information that might not appear from the questionnaire for pupils. 6 teachers were chosen from both schools. Some of them were interviewed in class, while others during the break time. The Pupils' questionnaire as well as the teachers' interview were conducted for the same purpose. In other words both aimed at seeking the language difficulties encountered by pupils in classroom interaction and the reasons that stand behind such linguistic deficiency. The teachers were interviewed on the basis of more complex questions like: 'What reasons stand behind pupils' linguistic deficiency?' or 'what are the main language difficulties that pupil encounter when using literary Arabic in classroom interaction?'

The subjects' responses were noted down on a note-book that was used only by the researcher, without rejecting any detail since certain ideas were thought to be very helpful. Moreover, she did not interrupt the respondents, nor did she try to correct them, so as not to create any embarrassment. Right after the interview, she transformed the notes into passages because it was necessary to formulate an interview summary before forgetting its details.

FINDINGS

This section starts first by presenting the results based on the responses from each of the three questions administered to young pupils in the school settings mentioned above.

Question 1: By which variety of Arabic can you express yourself better?

The following table indicates the scores concerning the variety of Arabic by which pupils can express themselves better in classroom interaction.

Table 1: Pupils' Use of MSA vs AA in Class

Pupils	MSA	Freq.	AA	Freq.
Ibn Msaib N=32	18	6,25%	14	43,75%
Mustapha Chiali N= 30	8	26,67%	22	73,33%

When pupils from *Ibn Msaib* PS were asked about the variety in which they express themselves better in classroom interaction, the majority affirmed that it is MSA. A girl aged 6 said: *'Mum always reads to me a story in the language of the classroom[1] before going to bed, so I have a great deal of vocabulary in this 'language' in mind'.* Another girl aged 7 replied: 'Daddy *speaks the language of the classroom at home, I never call him 'Papa', but instead, I call him 'abi', so I am accustomed to use the language of the classroom with my parents at home.* However, when the same question was posed to pupils from *Mustapha Chiali* PS, the majority claimed 'AA'. One boy aged 6 answered: '*I spend so much time in the street playing football, so no body speaks the language of the classroom in the neighbourhood'.* Another girl also aged 6 said *'I watch French cartoons like 'Tiji' and 'Piwi' and nobody in my family uses the language of the classroom at home, so I cannot express myself spontaneously in MSA in class.'*

Question 2: Is it easy to learn Modern Standard Arabic?

Table 2: Pupils' Perception about Learning MSA

	Yes		No		A Little Bit	
Ibn Msaib N=32	18	56,25%	10	31,25%	4	12,50%
Mustapha Chiali N=30	10	33,33%	15	50%	5	16,67%

Most pupils from *Ibn Msaib* PS reported 'yes' for this question. For instance, a young girl aged 7 said: *'when I go home, I do my homework, and then I watch 'Toyor-el- Djennah'; in this channel, all the cartoons are broadcasted in the language of the classroom, so it is very easy to understand and learn it at school.* Another boy from the same PS claimed: 'I *always go to the mosque with abi on Fridays, the Imam speaks the language of the classroom and abi also, reads the Qur'an in this language. This is the language of God and personally, I find it easy to learn and to understand the language of the classroom'.* Still others claimed that it is easy to learn and to understand MSA as they had already studied this variety in pre-school grade.By contrast, a boy aged 7 from *Mustapha Chiali* PS said: '*Idon't understand the language of the classroom, it is very difficult, and it is all about pronunciation. Why the home language[2] is not taught instead?; this is the language we use everywhere, with our parents as well as with our friends'.* Another boy from the same PS answered '*It is not easy at all; I find it hard when I speak the language of the classroom and* even *the teacher uses the home language whenexplaining the lessons.'* When the question 'How well do you speak MSA?' was posed, the majority of

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[1]By 'the language of the classroom', the pupils meant obviously Modern Standard Arabic.
[2]What is meant by 'the home language' is obviously Algerian Arabic and pupils are accustomed to call it this way in the classroom.

respondents from both PS reply '*a little bit*'. The majority of first grade pupils in *Mustapha chiali* PS did not have the chance to have access to pre-schooling. Moreover, the majority of pupils from both PS said that they lack vocabulary in Standard Arabic and that it is difficult to pronounce some words.

Question 3: How well do you speak Modern Standard Arabic?

We see from the following table the degree of MSA production by the learners as mentioned in the third question 'How well do you speak MSA?

Table 3: Pupils' Proficiency in Speaking MSA

	Perfectly		A Little Bit		Not at All	
Ibn Msaib N= 32	8	25%	20	62,50%	4	12,50%
Mustapha Chiali N= 30	2	6,67%	16	53, 33%	12	40%

Six teachers were interviewed on the basis of open-ended questions used to gather more reliable data about the language difficulties that pupils face in classroom interaction.

Question 1: What reasons stand behind pupils' linguistic deficiency?

The first teacher claimed: '*Because the pre-school grade does not exist in our school, pupils in first grade level have great difficulties when interacting with their teachers*'. Another one said: '*this is mainly due to the syllabus which emphasizes on reading and writing skills rather than on practicing the language*.' Still another one affirmed that: '*Most teachers use their dialects when explaining the lessons and they are doing a disservice to pupils. The teacher sets an example; if he uses solely MSA in class, the pupils will inevitably follow and learn from him, since their memory is still fresh.*' A female teacher who had an experience of ten years said: '*it is not the fault of pupils since they are still young; we, as Arabic course teachers, should spend remarkable efforts to teach them this beautiful language and try to avoid using AA when explaining the lessons. In addition, we need the creation of a preschool grade in order to facilitate the transition from home to school*'.

Question 2: What are the main language difficulties that pupils encounter when using MSA in classroom interaction?

All the teachers insist on lexical as well as phonological difficulties. A male teacher who had an experience of twenty years affirmed: '*pupils in general feel a kind of linguistic insecurity as they lack vocabulary in MSA and do not pronounce correctly some words, especially those phonemes which appear to be the same as /t/ and /I/; /q/and /k/; /s/ and /▪/; /d/ and /℘/, and many others. For example words like /Iala:Ia/, /℘ala:mun/ or /▪a:ra/ are realized by the majority of pupils like /tala:ta/, /dala:mun/, or/sa:ra/. I always insist on the right pronunciation of these consonants.*'

DISCUSSIONS

The present study unveils the concrete issue of pupils' exposure to MSA in a diglossic situation in Tlemcen primary schools. Pupils make great efforts to use MSA in classroom interaction for various reasons such as their linguistic deficiency in MSA and their lack of exposure to the standard variety before formal schooling, in addition MSA is not acquired naturally from birth and its structure is complex. Pupils from *Mustapha Chiali PS*, in particular, when they find it difficult to express some idea in MSA, they automatically switch to their dialects which they find much easier to communicate with their teachers. The pupils' deficiency in MSA communicative skills is a result of the paucity use of this

variety in classroom interaction and lack of exposure to MSA before formal education. Parents generally assume that children do not understand MSA and do not like being read to in this variety. Here, the importance of children's experience of language interaction in the home as well as in the school is paramount. In fact, the recurring use of the dialect makes pupils' tongues more familiar with the dialect than MSA. The learners use the vernacular in classroom interaction because they are not proficient enough to communicate in MSA and, they find it disconnected from the reality of the verbal expressions used in every-day life. Furthermore, as asserted in the findings, the linguistic distance between colloquial Arabic and literary Arabic affects mainly vocabulary and phonology. The educational problems and the persistent feelings of linguistic insecurity are directly related to the diglossic nature of Arabic. This lack of security comes from a general feeling of low understanding of Modern Standard Arabic and of low identification of its norms (Maamouri, 1998).

Another important finding of this study is that pupils from *Mustapha Chiali* PS demonstrate stronger proficiency in AA use when interacting with their teachers, whereas, pupils from *Ibn Msaib* show to a somewhat higher extent, better proficiency in MSA use in classroom interaction. This may be interpreted that such proficiency relates to the fact that these pupils have already benefited from pre-schooling, while pupils from the other PS have been deprived from this advantage. It is therefore safely suggested that, if preschool teaching was taken seriously into account in all schools and given all support from educational authorities, the first grade pupils will be better prepared and their school achievement would be much higher. As a result, the problem of diglossia would be reduced.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this empirical work reveal that strenuous efforts are made by the majority of pupils when using MSA in classroom interaction because of their deficiency in communicative skills in the standard variety; frustration and low linguistic self-confidence felt by young pupils are due to their inability to find the adequate words to express their ideas effectively in MSA. However, the results also show that pupils from *Ibn Msaib* PS slightly outperform pupils from *Mustapha Chiali* for, the former have benefited from pre-schooling, whereas the latter have been deprived from this privilege. Another important reason relating to better proficiency is that pupils who were exposed early to literary Arabic have more chance for success than pupils whose exposure to the standard variety is reduced or totally absent before formal instruction.

Therefore, educators should be aware of the effect of diglossia on pupils' learning process as they should be trained to explain the linguistic differences between colloquial and standard Arabic to their pupils (in terms of vocabulary, phonology and grammar). They should also recognize that there needs to be an educational reform in the teaching of Arabic in the school system. In addition, parents' awareness-raising would be an essential first step. On the basis of our findings in this study, some strategies can be highly recommended. They are as follows:

- Parents' awareness about the drawbacks of limiting their children's exposure to MSA during early childhood should be raised.

- Encouraging parents to read to their children in MSA, especially before formal instruction.

- The creation of pre-school grades in all primary schools.

- Interest in teaching Arabic functionally i.e., in making pupils acquire the linguistic skills rather than teaching them grammar; or getting them to know the language instead of knowing about the language.

Finally, helping young pupils to learn a pure form of Arabic is a shared responsibility between all members involved in education, starting from the ministry of education to the pupils' social context, and it should be worth mentioning again that the role of parents remains an important key for a good linguistic level in primary education.

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