

# Editor-in-Chief's Introduction

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This *Issue of Arab Journal of Applied Linguistics* concentrates on topics related to *Reading and Writing Skills* and reviews a book on *Evaluation* and a book on fostering *Democratic Education*. The first two articles focus on learner attitudes towards and practices of Reading and Writing, while the third article addresses the effect of diglossia on literacy development.

Diane Malcolm's article, "Some Effects of Proficiency and Practice on Beliefs about Academic Reading", investigates the relationship between beliefs about reading and reading habits. It is in line with the view in psychology that beliefs about and attitudes towards what constitutes knowledge contributes to, and is impacted by, one's past learning experience, skills, confidence, autonomy, and achievement. Malcolm relied on a questionnaire which she designed on the bases of: group interviews, questionnaires she had gathered from previous studies, and a learner biography study conducted by Malcolm herself. The questionnaire targeted Year One and Year Three medical students enrolled at the Arabian Gulf University in the Manama branch, Bahrain. It revealed that the informants had positive beliefs and attitudes towards reading. These positive beliefs and attitudes included: reading at an early age helps in reading at later stages; comprehension is more

rewarding than memorisation; reading develops other language skills; and the richer one's vocabulary grows, the easier one's understanding gets. The informants also acknowledged that they translated unfamiliar words into Arabic to achieve text understanding. Moreover, the questionnaire results revealed that Year One students had a higher level of anxiety and a lower degree of autonomy than Year Three students. Malcolm cautions that because the informants were volunteers and the population was constituted of students in one discipline, the findings cannot be generalised.

However, one can sense from Malcolm's case study that there are indications that education in the Arab world is distancing itself from rote learning and memorisation. It is moving, albeit slowly and in some cases hesitantly, towards building up learner autonomy and learner ingenuity. The medical students in Malcolm's work may not be very competent readers or writers, but they believe that taking on challenging texts helps them develop higher cognitive skills, bolster their self-confidence, and open up new and expanding horizons in their respective specialisms. Students who hold such positive views and beliefs need a qualified, dedicated, and dexterous helping hand that guides them in their literacy journey. Marine Milad's study contributes a way to offering such a hand.

Milad's article, "Blended Learning Approach: Integrating Reading and Writing Research Skills to Improve Academic Writing", capitalises on the current theoretical views in the field of education, the progressive attitudes and beliefs about second/foreign language teaching and learning in the Arab world, the job market requirements, and teenagers' high technological skills in using various software programmes to engage her

university students in a blended teaching-learning process that adopts Web Quest (WQ) Applications and integrates Reading and Writing. Milad conducted a pilot study, a pre-test, and a post-test. The results she obtained following the implementation of the blended learning course show that the participants benefited tremendously from the course. They developed a better mastery of a number of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading subskills, which, in their turn, impacted their pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing subskills positively.

Milad's study is commendable. It supports previous research on the benefits of blended learning and it represents an example of *Action Research* where the teacher-researcher often does their best to help their students achieve good results. Indeed, blended learning allows motivated and dedicated students to venture out of the confines of the classroom, engage in self-study, benefit from multiple input sources, and refine their technological expertise. Blended learning, however, requires teachers to redefine their roles, upgrade their technological skills, and adjust their practices (some teachers may need to catch up with their students' technological expertise). Governments need to spend more on training teachers and on providing schools, especially those in remote areas, with the appropriate facilities.

Blended learning may have negative effects on weak students and their teachers. Milad noted that some of her students who had a low-language-proficiency level could not engage in pair-work or group-work. They failed to keep pace with the reading-writing course, and, sadly, they dropped out. Hence, perhaps, the high positive statistical results

she obtained. Blended-learning may have even worse adverse effects than face-to-face teaching/learning on low-language-proficiency level students. They would feel abandoned by their teachers, and experience helplessness, anxiety, and low self-esteem, which they would often redress, if they did not drop out, by relying on parallel tutors, paid-for homework, cuts-and-pastes from digital sources, deliberate downloads, Google Translate gibberish products, or blatant plagiarism.

Teachers who are enthusiastic about e-learning, but who prefer to ward-off any discontent with their teaching practices and to avoid any low-success rates, for which they may have to provide justifications, may be tempted to turn a blind eye on who is doing, or did, what online, or offline, and to resort to *test score pollution* which includes in particular: scoring high, presenting items identical to those in the test, presenting items similar to those in the test (Haladyna, 1992), and in some contexts, helping students while the test is underway.

Given the rather unsatisfactory level of many students who make it to tertiary education in some countries in the Arab world, it would be desirable to familiarise students with blended-learning at school. Primary and secondary school teachers would initiate their students to higher thinking skills that would be reflected in their communication capabilities, especially their reading and writing of general texts. At tertiary level, blended learning would progressively transcend basic language skills, as well as the reading comprehension and production of general texts, to focus on academic knowledge (specialised content) and genre characteristics and production. This is easier said than done.

Ghada Gherwash reminds us that Arab learners suffer from an additional handicap; they struggle with the effects of diglossia on them while learning to read and write.

Gherwash's article, "Diglossia and Literacy: The Case of the Arab Reader", draws attention to controversies over the definition of literacy and to conflicting statistical figures rating literacy in Arab countries. It argues along with current relevant research that diglossia in the Arab world is one of the major causes of illiteracy and that literacy acquisition has nothing to do with economic wealth or access to resources in the rich Gulf states. Gherwash conducted a case study in which four educated adult speakers from Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen talked about their literacy acquisition, particularly the development of their reading skill. She relied on the interview technique and *NVivo* software for unstructured and qualitative data analysis. The informants' narratives indicated that pre-school children had little exposure to Modern Standard Arabic in its written mode. They watched cartoons and children television programmes in MSA or attended Quranic schools classes where they learned to read, memorise, and write the alphabet and short verses from the Holy Quran (which is in Classical Arabic). Their encounter with MSA at primary school ranged from being painful to being traumatic, depending on their former exposure to MSA. The textbooks were in MSA, and the teachers' speech was at best a mixture of Vernacular Arabic (VA) and MSA. Reading and writing in MSA were tedious chores performed as "school obligations" (The Arabic equivalent of in-class work or homework). Their childhood experience contributed to feelings of discomfort

and unease every time they engaged in reading and/or writing, and, caused them to read less and write lesser.

The context in which Gherwash's informants acquired literacy has changed, and, in stable countries in the Arab world at least, it is changing for the better. More and more children go to nurseries, more and more of today's parents are educated, access to languages is easier and faster, and diglossia is milder than what it was decades ago (Abdesslem & Milad, 2008).

However, war-stricken countries are witnessing a dramatic regression of the gains they made. According to a UNICEF report (2017), 29 million children are deprived of basic education, decent housing, basic healthcare, and access to information. This state of affairs makes any attempt at measuring literacy across the Arab world difficult. Furthermore, literacy is no longer confined to the ability to decipher letters and words or to handwrite them. The rapid changes that are taking place in this postmodern era have made it hardly possible for researchers to reach any consensus on a valid and durable enough definition of literacy (or illiteracy for that matter), and it seems that, aside from the contamination of politics and the chaos of wars and displacements in the Arab world, the discrepancies in literacy reports that researchers lament are also caused by differences in defining the concept itself.

Literacy is today more and more multilingual, polysemiotic, multimodal, and multicultural. Texts are woven by authors whose presence, subjectivity, and attitude range from being explicit to being implicit. They are laden with semantic and cultural codes and

crisscrossed by former texts (Barthes, 1973). To set standard criteria and measurements to determine a person's literacy level or a community's rate of literacy is yet to come, but one can safely and confidently claim that individuals who engage in bottom-up reading or who produce sentences that they align next to each other cannot be considered literate. Literacy, as Hidri and Coombe's edited book reveals, is tied to Evaluation.

Melanie Gobert's Review of *Evaluation in Foreign Language Education in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Sahbi Hidri & Christine Coombe and published by Springer in 2017, introduces the book's eight Parts and the Chapters therein. Gobert's summary of each Chapter gives readers a panoramic view of the book and allows them to opt for the Chapters that suit their purposes. The book discusses Evaluation at all levels of education in relation to language learning and language teaching and in relation to the wider socio-cultural context in which it is undertaken.

The book is worth reading for at least the following findings and recommendations: Arab students value teachers' personal attributes more than teachers' pedagogical skills; supervisors and inspectors' standards of evaluation of teachers' competencies could do with more clarifications; static assessment is unfair to hardworking and autonomous students; dynamic assessment helps students improve their language skills and develop their cognitive abilities; test score pollution is detrimental to the educational system.

Evaluation contributes to learning-teaching processes, reveals students' achievements, and, most importantly, reflects teachers' knowledge and pedagogical competency (Abdesslem, 2017). Before being evaluations of students' success, tests are

reflections of teachers' knowledge, competency, and ingenuity; ("Show me your test, and I'll tell you how good you are!"). Students' excellent grades are not necessarily signs of high achievement. Unchallenging tests often reflect mere *Factual Knowledge* dispensed by the book or the teacher and *Remembering* done by the student. (See Bloom's taxonomy in Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Unchallenging tests are symptoms of an outdated conception of literacy. Worse still, they contribute very much to perpetuating that "primitive literacy".

The growing number of private schools in many Arab countries is indicative of a general discontent with government schools and their standards (Abdesslem & Milad, 2008). This situation contributes to further disparity between children with different economic, social, and geographical backgrounds, and it often has long-term effects on their personality and their social and economic statuses. One wonders about chances democracy has if education is undemocratic.

In her Review of *Teaching for Democracy in an Age of Disparity*, edited by Cory Wright-Maley & Trent Davis and published by Routledge Taylor & Francis in 2017, Khadija AL Balushi provides the reader with a brief summary of each Chapter in each of the four Parts of the book, and then concludes her Review of each Part with suggestions, recommendations, or criticisms.

Though *Teaching for Democracy in an Age of Disparity* is about democratising education in the US, it is very timely, as a few Arab countries are going through the rite of passage to democracy in painful and, for some, devastating ways. The book argues that

education can still produce democratic citizens with humanitarian values in an individualistic, neoliberalist, society driven by market forces, where children are seen as young "economic citizens" (or "customers") who, when they grow up, will sell their expertise on the job market. To counter neoliberalism in the US may sound utopian, but the contributors to Wright-Maley and Davis' volume are convinced it can be initiated in schools.

Khadija AL Balushi's Review of *Teaching for Democracy in an Age of Disparity* represents a call on educationists in the Arab world to join forces with their brethren in the rest of the world to instil in children the values of respect, justice, cooperation, and fair competition. To do so, Arab educationists, members of civic societies and students need to use English to *contact, connect, interact, and act* with their counterparts in order to exert a *soft power* that aspires to make humanity humane. (See "English for peace" by Friedrich, 2007). Labassi (2008) argues that communicating with the rest of the world in English outweighs the disadvantages that leftist linguists in the West, postcolonial researchers in the East and West, and conservative scholars in the Arab World cite. The disadvantages have an infamous common denominator, "*Hegemony*".

As Editor-in-chief of *Arab Journal of Applied Linguistics*, I would like to thank the contributors to this *Issue*. I appreciate their patience and cooperation and value their contribution. I wish those whose typescripts did not make it in this *Issue* success in getting their work published in *AJAL*. I am indebted to Melanie Gobert for preparing the *Call for*

*Papers* and for undertaking a preliminary selection from the many typescripts she received. I am equally indebted to all those who helped with the review and proof-reading of the selected typescripts: Melanie Gobert, Sahbi Hidri, Abdessatar Mahfoudhi, Hassan Costello, and Hajer Braham. I owe a debt of gratitude to the evaluators who chose to remain anonymous. I look forward to working with the Guest Editors of the forthcoming *Issue* of *AJAL*.

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