

Book Review

Handbook of Arabic Literacy: Insights and Perspectives.

By Elinor Saiegh-Haddad & R. Malatesha Joshi (Eds.). (2014).

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The Handbook of Arabic Literacy by Elinor Saiegh-Haddad and Malt Joshi is the first comprehensive volume that presents the most up-to-date research results on Arabic literacy development after the publication of a special issue on Arabic literacy in the journal *Reading & Writing* (Mahfoudhi, Elbeheri & Everatt, 2011), an initiative of the second editor, Prof. Joshi. The present volume is multidisciplinary; it approaches the Arabic literacy development from linguistic, socio-cultural, and cognitive perspectives in both typical and atypical populations. The eighteen chapters of the book are distributed over six parts to reflect the mentioned perspectives.

The first part is a detailed description of the structure of the Arabic language and its orthography with a focus on the aspects that have a direct bearing on literacy acquisition. The second part, made of three chapters, discusses lexical processing and representation in Arabic. Both the third and the fourth parts deal with Arabic literacy development. While the third part focuses on the cognitive factors, the fourth part addresses the sociolinguistic factors in literacy development. Part V is devoted to early literacy development, also referred to as emergent literacy. The last part presents research results on literacy development in some special populations.

In what follows, I will briefly summarize the chapters in the same order they were presented in the book. As mentioned above, the first part, one single chapter,

describes the linguistic structure of the Arabic language, the sociolinguistic issue of diglossia, and the specificities of the Arabic orthography. This chapter serves as a background to most of the chapters to follow in the remainder of the book.

Part II on lexical representation and processing has three chapters. The first chapter, by Sami Boudelaa, discusses whether Arabic words are represented as morphemes or as whole words. Based on evidence mainly from psychological and neuroimaging experiments that he and his colleagues did, Boudelaa argues that the Arabic mental lexicon is mainly morpheme-based. That is, in productive content words, roots and patterns serve as the main lexical entry units that are stored in long term memory and are used in word recognition.

In the second chapter, Gunna Funder-Hansen argues that the current models of word recognition cannot account for the specific aspects of Arabic morphology and its script. Based on reviews of current word recognition, the author suggests a modified model of word recognition based on connectionist models that is sensitive to the specificities of the Arabic orthography and morphology. The model remains a speculation without empirical testing.

In the third chapter, Eviatar and Ibrahim give an account of why an Arabic text is processed more slowly than a text in English or Hebrew using data from their previous studies. Apart from the classical diglossic issue, that is, the discrepancy between the language of the child and the language learned at school for literacy, the authors attribute the slow processing of Arabic text to its visually complex script. Based on evidence from their previous studies using neuropsychological methods, they suggest that unlike what happens in most language, the right hemisphere, is minimally involved in early word recognition because of the way the Arab reader develops their reading strategies.

Part III deals with literacy development and break down with a focus on the cognitive factors, mainly orthographic processing. In the first chapter in this section, Wessam Mohamed, Karin Landrel and Thomas Ebert report on the results of an epidemiological survey in which they screened the reading and spelling disabilities

among third graders in Egypt. The results showed that reading and spelling disabilities were associated in most of the cases.

The second chapter, by Naama Friedman and Manar Haddad-Hanna, also deals with reading disabilities in Palestinian Arabic readers. The authors describe dyslexia sub-types that they identified in previous studies. The subtypes they report are (i) letter position dyslexia, (ii) attentional dyslexia, (iii) visual dyslexia, (iv) neglect dyslexia, (v) surface dyslexia, (vi) vowel dyslexia, (vii) and deep dyslexia. Apart from surface dyslexia and deep dyslexia, the other types are quite uncommon and need further research for validation.

The third chapter is not directly related to reading. In this chapter, Dorit Ravid and her colleagues report on the results of study that examined the development of narrative skills in seven Palestinian age groups: (4-5 years), (5-6 years), (6-7 years), (7-8 years), (9-10 years), and (12-13 years). The story retelling tasks in Modern Standard Arabic showed a gradual increase with age and schooling in the content, lexical items, and morphosyntactic structures and a decrease in the number of the linguistic errors.

The last chapter in this part is also based on data from Palestinian-Arabic speaking learners. The authors, Hanadi Abu Ahmad, Rafiq Ibrahim, and David Share report a study that examined cognitive predictors of reading ability, both in word reading and comprehension, from Kindergarten to grade 2. In Kindergarten, the learners were administered a battery of tests that included the following skills: phonemic awareness, phonological processing, visual-orthographic processing, pre-school print concepts, morphological awareness, general nonverbal ability, receptive vocabulary, syntactic awareness and working memory. In Grade 2, they were tested on word reading and reading comprehension. The results of the statistical analyses, showed that phonemic awareness was the strongest predictor of word reading performance, followed by phonological processing, pre-school literacy, morphological awareness, visual-orthographic processing and syntactic awareness. Reading comprehension was also predicted by the same skills in addition to general

non-verbal ability. These results show that phonological skills (both phonemic awareness and phonological processing) play a major role not only for word reading but also for reading comprehension in Grade 2.

Part IV, made of five chapters, focuses on the question of diglossia and its implications for literacy development. Diglossia in the Arabic context refers to the co-existence of two varieties, a low variety, Colloquial Arabic and a high variety, Modern Standard Arabic that are functionally in complementary distribution. The major problem associated with diglossia in Arabic is the fact that Modern Standard Arabic, the language learned at school for literacy and formal communication, is not the native language of any one.

In the first chapter in this section, John Myhill argues that this discrepancy between the colloquial variety/dialect of the learner and the language of literacy, Standard Arabic, is the main cause behind the low performance of Arab learners on international literacy tests. He suggests that this could be improved if Arabic adopted the strategy that was used in similar contexts, such as the Japanese or Chinese contexts, where literacy is taught in the first few years using a representation of the dialects of the children before a shift is made to the standard variety.

The same topic in the chapter by Myhill is discussed in the second chapter by Elinor Saiegh-Haddad and Bernard Spolsky. They, however, propose a more practical solution to the low performance on reading. They report on the development a program, dubbed “Exposure Through Reading Program”, that was designed to solve some of these issues. The program involves extensive work on the language of children in both varieties in the preschool and early school years to identify the common shared words and morphemes as well identifying the gaps to inform curriculum development and teaching.

In the third chapter of this section, Lior Laks and Ruth Berman compared grammatical structures (case marking and nominalization) in Modern Standard Arabic and Jordanian Arabic in spoken and written versions of a story retelling task.

The results revealed modality-driven variation within both varieties. The authors discuss the pedagogical implications of these results.

The fourth chapter by Rosenhouse studies the “textbooks in Israeli Arabic-Speaking Schools” in grades 1, 2, 4, 8 and 11 in terms of the grammatical structures used and compares them to their equivalent structures in the dialect of the Palestinian learners. This exercise was done to evaluate whether the choice of the Modern Standard Arabic structures across the textbooks is psycho-linguistically and pedagogically valid. The author also compared the use of these linguistic features in the mentioned textbooks with the results of a similar previous study she did on grades 1 and 2. Her analysis revealed that the mentioned features were used differently across the grade levels and in comparison to the previously studied older textbooks.

In the fifth chapter, Reem Khamis-Dakwar and Baha Makhoul describe a test (the Arabic Diglossic Knowledge and Awareness Test) that measures elementary school Palestinian Arabic-speaking children’s language skills and sociolinguistic awareness. The tests included a receptive vocabulary test, a morphosyntactic knowledge test, phonological diglossic awareness test, a sociolinguistic knowledge of diglossia, and a narrative task.

The two chapters of Part V are devoted to the socio-cultural factors affecting Arabic emergent literacy. In the first chapter, Sana Tibi and Lorraine McLeod describe the challenges for emergent literacy in the Emirate of Abu-Dhabi within the newly introduced educational reform and the general linguistic and educational context and make recommendations for policy makers, educators, and parents.

The other chapter by Ofra Korat and her colleagues report on a study that examined the development of language and literacy of Palestinian children within the family context. They examined the effects of mother-child literacy activities (story reading and joint word writing), socioeconomic status (SES) and home literacy environment (HLE) on the literacy performance of sample of KG students. The results showed that while SES, HLE and parental mediation all contributed to the

writing task performance in the mentioned order, only SES and HLE contributed to the reading task.

Part VI is devoted to Arabic literacy development in special populations, which include bilingual children, learners of Arabic as a Foreign Language, and blind individuals. Lama Farran and her colleagues report on a study in which they examined the role of literacy practices, home language use and parent education and beliefs in the language and literacy performance of English-Arabic bilingual children in the USA. The results revealed that parents' home language use and literacy practices were highly related to Arabic language and literacy. While home language use was more related with word reading, vocabulary and morphological awareness, literacy practices were related to reading comprehension performance.

Susie Russak and Alon Fragman review two studies they did to examine the spelling (phoneme-grapheme representation) development among Hebrew-speaking children learning Arabic as a Foreign Language. In the first study they examined the spelling errors of eighth graders. The analysis of the errors showed novel phonemes (which do not exist in the child's first language) as well as phonemes that have similar sounding neighbors and phonemes that have more than one orthographic representation (allography) were particularly difficult. The second study focused on the development of novel phonemes in 8th graders, 9th graders and 10th graders. The findings revealed very little progress in accuracy across grades.

In the last chapter, Waleed Jarjoura and Avi Karni reported on the results of a study that examined the reading speed and accuracy of vowelized and non-vowelized Arabic Braille words and texts among three age groups of blind Palestinian individuals in Haifa (10 years, 16 years and 23 years). The findings indicated an improvement of speed of reading with age, but the performance was considered slow compared to the performance of similar English Braille learners. The results also showed that especially the younger learners had specific accuracy difficulties with the unvowelized words and texts.

With its numerous contributions and the breadth of topics covered, this volume constitutes a valuable addition to the area of Arabic language and literacy that makes it a must-read for anyone interested in language and literacy in the Arab World. One of the limitations of this work is that it has too many papers on the effect on diglossia on literacy development. Besides, most of the papers come from Arab learners in Israel, a context that is far from representative of the typical Arab learner.

References

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