

Teaching Vocabulary to Diglossic Student

تدريس مفردات اللغة العربية للتلاميذ مزدوجي اللغة

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Abstract

In this study, the main hypothesis is that diglossia may impede vocabulary growth of bilingual students [in L1 Arabic], but they should eventually improve in the upper cycle. A correlation design based on a two-stage random sample was used with 100 participants including pre-schoolers, first, second, fourth and fifth graders, answering a standardized, US normed picture vocabulary test. Parents and teachers were also surveyed to answer a number of questions related to children's language preference at home and at school and vocabulary teaching practices. The results obtained show that their Arabic skills were not grade appropriate, especially the older students. Thus the negative effect worsens for the older group. Both parents and teachers recognized the challenges posed by the diglossia effect in knowledge transfer and most of them had no reliable strategies to draw on. Diglossia was therefore shown to impede vocabulary development in young Arabic of bilingual students, a finding which should call for a reform in the Arabic language instruction in the school system of all Arabic speaking countries. Implications of the study are detailed, and a number of instructional strategies are provided to palliate the effect of diglossia and address the Arabic language deficits.

Keywords : Diglossia, vocabulary acquisition, standard Arabic, colloquial Arabic, educated spoken Arabic, difficulties, teaching methods, differences, facilitating, task –based-language teaching(TBLT).

ملخص

تذكر الديقلوسيا عندما جماعة من الناس تستعمل لغتين واحدة منهما مشتقة من الأخرى. و أحسن مثال لذلك هو اللغة العربية و الدارجات الشتي اللواتي تتكلم في العالم العربي.

البحث يركز على عدم العلاقة بين اللغة الفصحى التي هي لغة التدريس و اللغة الرسمية في جميع القطر العربي و اللغة الدرجة (التي هي مأخوذة من اللغة الفصحى) التي هي أساسا لغة الأم و تستعمل يوميا في جميع الحالات. تفرض عليها تطورات إجتماعية، تكنوليجا و ثقافية و يصبح إستعمالها و فهمها بعيد تمام البعد عن اللغة الفصحى التي هي تبقى جامدة.

الإشكالية هي كيف يتم تحويل المعرفة من البيت إلى المدرسة و العكس صحيح، بما أن التعبير اللغوي في المدرسة غير التعبير اللغوي في البيت. التباعد بين اللغتين يظهر ليس فقط في إستعمال المفردات بل في تركيب الجمل و الأصوات و النحو و الصرف إلى غير ذلك، هذا التباعد يجعل من اللغتين العربية الفصحى و الدرجة لغتين أجنبيتين عن بعضهما البعض.

الإشكالية الكبرى هي بدون شك إكتساب التعبير الشفوي في بداية التدريس كي يصبح الطفل متعود على الكلمات و معانيها.

في هذا البحث نقترح عدة طرق و مناهج بيداغوجية لتسهيل التقارب بين اللغتين. هذه المناهج تم تجربتها في بعض الدول التي تعيش مثل هذه المشكلة اللسانية و تم إثبات إيجابيتها.

الكلمات الدالة : الديقلوسيا، اللغة الفصحى، اللغة الدرجة، تباعد، تقارب ، إكتساب، إستعمال، مناهج، طرق بيداغوجية، تسهيل، الطفل، تدريس.

1- Introduction

A growing body of evidence shows that students face a lot of difficulties learning the Arabic language mostly due to its diglossic nature (Ayari, 1996). Diglossia refers to the existence of two varieties of the same language: the standard Arabic or “fusha” and the colloquial or “darija” (Versteegh, 2001, p. 189) which are linguistically distant (Saiegh-Haddad, 2003). Standard Arabic varies from colloquial Arabic in four main parts of the language which are “vocabulary, phonology, syntax, and grammar” (Abu-Rabia, 2000, p. 147). Thus, children perceive standard Arabic at school as a foreign language (Abu-Rabia, 2000). This is best captured by this mid-school learner teen’s outcry: “In Arabic classes I am under stress not to say words I have learned in spoken Arabic. I ask myself why have they taught me things I should forget?!” (Brosh & Olshtain, 1995, p. 257)”

There are other factors besides diglossia which may further hinder vocabulary development. They include the lesser emphasis placed on Arabic in the curriculum relative to English or French, the relatively unappealing nature of instructional materials in Arabic, and the preference of parents to teach their children English or French at the detriment of Arabic. Maamouri (1998) poor vocabulary repertoire to their limited daily exposure to essential words, lack of trained Arabic language teachers, and inconsistent reading habits at home. However, this study will be restricted to looking at diglossia in relation to vocabulary acquisition in school where the Arabic language is emphasized.

2- 1 Lexical Presentation

The concept of vocabulary acquisition is far more complicated than just memorizing the meaning of words. It is the teachers’ job to guide students to learn appropriate words (Shewell, 2009). In her literature review, Mei-fang (2008) identified several approaches teachers are urged to keep in mind when teaching vocabulary, namely context, usage, morphology, grammar, frequency, and coverage (Mei-fang, 2008). In addition, teachers should not treat all words indiscriminately (Mei-fang, 2008; Fang and Xi-ya, 2009), help students select vocabulary words that

lend themselves to feedback and finally teach the students to use different strategies to help them learn the targeted words (Shewell, 2009; Swanson and Howerton, 2007).

2-2 Vocabulary Strategies

Research on vocabulary teaching strategies mainly focuses on English as a foreign language or second language acquisition that is dominating the field (Broady, 2008).

The main empirical findings outlined in the literature recommend reading and vocabulary enhancement activities (Min, 2008), use of image-schema-based instruction especially for words with physical characteristics such as “over” (Morimoto and Loewen, 2007), use of explicit tasks for learners to be able to link both form and meaning of words (Webb, 2007), repeated fill-in-the-blank exercises (3 blanks) to increase word retention (Folse, 2006), glossing target words frequently and allowing students to retrieve the words in their native language (Rott, 2007).

As for lesson presentation, it seems that a task-based-language-teaching (TBLT) with the focus on forms component is most effective for retention (De La Fuente, 2006), and a collaborative learning approach surpasses individual learning on vocabulary tests (Kim, 2008). Other suggested strategies include “role rehearsal, using visual aids, role-playing, art activities, root-word approach, learning using music, physical activities, analogies, computer-assisted instruction, and synonyms” (Weatherford, 1990 in Akbari, 2008: 54), especially use of pictures (Akbari, 2008), flashcards (Shewell, 2009) and semantic mapping and finally relating new information to already stored information cognitively, use of schema-based theory such as learning by analogy, actively interacting with and manipulating words to better understand them (Fang and Xi-ya, 2009).

For younger students, the literature concurs that frequent storybook interactive aloud-reading (Robbins and Ehri, 1994) accompanied by brief explanations of target words, asking a few simple questions, pointing to pictures and naming pictures caused gains of up to 33% in vocabulary acquisition (Elley, 1989; Senechal

et al., 1995). Initial vocabulary ability of the child is an important indicator to further gains. Children with higher vocabulary knowledge make more gains than children that initially possessed lower vocabulary knowledge (Penno et al. 2002). Primary language story book reading is helpful for preschool children because it promotes cognitive development mainly related to concepts and language meanings, vocabulary enrichment, and more facility in acquiring second language vocabulary teaching (Roberts, 2008).

Similarly, children who read storybooks at home in their primary language outperformed children who read English books on English vocabulary acquisition, and were able to switch between the two languages easily without experiencing any negative effects on their second language vocabulary acquisition (Roberts, 2008).

Although it is generally assumed that “the earlier one starts learning a language, the better” (Miralpeix, 2007: 62), this view has been challenged by recent research indicating that the known belief “the younger the better” is not always the case when learning only occurs at school and input is minimal (Mayo and Lecumberri, 2003; Griffin, 1993; Munoz, 2006, as cited in Miralpeix, 2007: 62). Miralpeix (2007) investigated the effects of the following: age of onset, cognitive maturity and amount of exposure on the productive vocabulary acquisition of students studying English as a foreign language with 93 bilingual high-school students divided among three groups. Results demonstrated that age depends on implicit learning events where children outshine adults, but adolescents benefit more from explicit instruction which is usually found at school. This may explain why the belief the younger the better is recently challenged. This was also supported by a study of Schmitt (2000) in Miralpeix (2007) who found that late starters (adolescents) who are more cognitively mature have a faster rate of acquisition than early starters (children), which proves that adolescents are comparatively more adept at productive vocabulary knowledge and in the long run, early starters of vocabulary learning do not benefit from productive vocabulary unless they are repeatedly exposed to vocabulary. On the other hand, Nation (2001, cited in Vidal, 2003) argued that

word exposure and repetitions only promote learning at moderate levels, and recommended instead deep process of the vocabulary in the form of explicit word elaboration.

3- Teaching Arabic: Order of Varieties

The area of teaching Arabic with respect to its order of varieties remains controversial due to the differences between the two varieties of the language components in terms of vocabulary, phonology, syntax, and grammar. Schools face several dilemmas best summarized by Brosh and Olshtain (1995). Should colloquial Arabic be emphasized first then introduce the standard variety or the other way around? Alternatively, should standard Arabic be the sole focus of instruction and colloquial Arabic is disregarded? Third, should one variety of the language be emphasized without discouraging the use of the other varieties?

A longitudinal survey conducted in 1999 to 2001 in preschool classes in Oran (Algeria) showed that when children are addressed in Fusha there is no stimulus. They only behave as repeaters after the teacher. However, as soon as the instructions are said in Darija, there is spontaneous interaction and the give and take between children and teachers is just appreciable.

4- Case Study

In Egypt, some schools teach colloquial or spoken categorization, and that have depth of processing with emphasis on inferencing strategies and mnemonics, such as keyword method (Broady, 2008), explain the targeted words, offer valuable Arabic to students in grades four through six and standard Arabic starting from grade seven onwards. This shift from colloquial to standard Arabic forces the students to adjust their vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Brosh and Olshtain's (1995) examination of the effectiveness of this approach with 469 seventh graders in Cairo revealed that teaching students colloquial Arabic before standard Arabic puts them at an advantage mainly in the area of listening because they rely on their previous experience with colloquial Arabic. On the other hand, students suffered in the areas of grammar and vocabulary because of the great differences between the two varieties of Arabic.

Recommendations for smooth transition from colloquial to standard Arabic include dealing with the standard as a new language, that is, purposefully forgetting old rules and words and substituting them with new ones, making the lesson presentation more appealing (Brosh and Olshtain, 1995), combining both varieties of Arabic together may be more useful (Albatal, 1992 in Brosh and Olshtain, 1995), make the lesson presentation more appealing (Brosh and Olshtain, 1995). Teaching ESA1 (Ryding, 1991) explain why the belief the younger the better is recently challenged. This was also supported by a study of (Ryding, 1991) may facilitate this dilemma because it is in the middle between colloquial Arabic and standard Arabic. It is believed to reduce the diglossic distance between the two varieties of the language (Brosh and Olshtain, 1995).

5- Diglossia and Reading

According to Rosenhouse and Shehadi (1986) in Feilston et al. (1993), parents, educators, and linguists blame the high reading difficulty rate in Arab schools on diglossia and as a result of this negative attitude, limit preschools' exposure to standard Arabic.

Feilston et al. (1993) examined the book-buying habits and reading patterns of 290 families of Arab kindergartners. Results revealed that only five of the families, that is, 1.8% of the sample actually read to their children from the books, whereas 58.2% of the sample orally recited stories to their children and the remaining 40% used books to read a story to their children but they did not read directly from the books. They actually told the child the story in colloquial Arabic and they just used the book to look at the pictures. Parents based their behaviour on the following assumptions: children do not understand standard Arabic and do not like being read to in standard Arabic. In conclusion, lack of exposure to standard Arabic in kindergarten deprives children from the requisite knowledge and skills needed to develop proficiency in standard Arabic (Feilston et al., 1993).

In a similar vein, studies investigating the relationship between reading to children and children's standard language knowledge found that Hebrew-speaking

kindergartners and first graders who listened to stories in standard Arabic without being allowed to revert to colloquial Arabic outperformed their peers in the control group on comprehension tasks, and used richer vocabulary when explaining a picture story, thus showing that when children's familiarity with standard Arabic within a story context directly extends to their active use of the language (Feilston et al., 1993; Ayari, 1996), even by grade two (Abu-Rabia, 2000) as "a person with more expertise has a larger knowledge base, and the large knowledge base allows that person to acquire even greater expertise at a faster rate (Stanovich, 1986: 381).

Rabia (2000) recommended that policy makers mandate the inclusion of standard Arabic in preschool education as part of the curriculum, and require teachers consistently use standard Arabic when teaching to develop students' reading skills and make the language more meaningful to them.

6- Challenges of Arabic

Research on the challenges of the Arabic language is scarce. The Arabic language belongs to the Semitic family of languages. Hence, it does not share cognates with the English language, neither with French, but rather, it includes noncognate words, thereby making vocabulary learning in Arabic profoundly challenging (Ryding and Bin Said, n.d.). Reading and writing Arabic occurs from right to left. It is made up of connected letters like cursive. Further, short vowels are not evident but they need to be pronounced when reading and long vowels are written in words. Arabic consists of phonemes that other languages such as English do not possess. These include "pharyngeals, uvulars, and velarized consonants" (Ryding and Bin Said, n.d., 3). Further, Arabic includes a complex morphological system. In this regard, diglossia is a concern that educational institutions and teachers need to take into consideration. According to Ryding and Bin Said (n.d.), the distance between colloquial Arabic and standard Arabic affects vocabulary more than grammar. For learners to achieve proficiency, they need to master at least three varieties of Arabic, namely standard Arabic, colloquial Arabic, and Educated Spoken Arabic (Brosh and Olshtain, 1995).

7- Conclusion

The primary goal of learning a language is to select language but the question is how should this school-selected language be characterized. It is rare that there will be agreement even among the experts as to what constitutes the appropriate varieties ;(standard, colloquial, educated spoken Arabic).

A critical feature of a school language is that , like a standard language , it is believed to be independent, autonomous, not a modified version on some other languages. It is not in other words a dialect.

When the language of the home and school are clearly distinct, the problem should be to all involved. School policy makers should seriously bend on the question and find appropriate teaching strategies to which all would adhere , purists and liberals. It is vital importance to foster vocabulary, communication and reading.

Parents 'concern is also to feel involved in their children's education. They need to take part in the knowledge transfer from home to school and vice versa . This process is not always possible in

countries where diaglossia as a linguistic phenomenon is present.

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