L1 Arabic speakers’ difficulties with reading in English

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Outline

- Background
- Reading
- Comparing English and Arabic
- Learning to read in Arabic L1
- Cross-linguistic effects
- Implications
What kind of linguistic skill problems have you noticed that Arabic speaking students have?

- Apparent imbalance in proficiencies: speaking vs. reading and writing
- Often poor in spelling
- Poor in word recognition
- Often slower at reading → impact on reading comprehension
Reading in English

- How did you learn to read in English?
  - By which method? Reading aloud or silently?
- Dual-route
  - Mapping sounds to letters, e.g. d-o-g, p-e-n (phoneme-to-grapheme)
  - Learning words as a whole, e.g. island, through (sight-word recognition)

- Spelling is key in word recognition
Reading processes

- Bottom-up model: building blocks
- Top-down model: holistic
- Combination: currently accepted view

‘Word recognition is where lower and higher level processes meet’ (Randall, 2009:118).
## Characteristics of the written languages

### English
- alphabetic
- from left to right
- 26 letters (44 sounds)
- 5 vowel letters (but 20 vowel sounds)
- deep orthography

### Arabic (MSA)
- alphabetic
- from right to left
- 28 letters
- 3 long vowels
- 3 short vowel diacritics
- two scripts:
  - shallow
  - deep
Learning to read in Arabic

- Literary Arabic vs spoken Arabic
- Year 1-2 shallow
- Year 3+ deep
- Shallow (fully vowelised)
  - Full provision
- Deep (unvowelised)
  - Lacking
Regular morphological word structure
- root + affixes
- indicate word class, person, tense, act/pass
- same root semantically related

**k-t-b** → *kataba* (wrote), *maktab* (office), *kitaab* (book), *yaktub* (write)

**d-r-s** → *dars* (lesson), *darasa* (studied), *mudaris* (teacher), *madrasa* (school)

**s-k-n** → *sakana* (lived), *sakan* (hostel/house), *sukina* (was lived - passive form)

highly homographic
Roots, affixes and diacritics

کتَب (wrote - *kataba*)

مکتَب (office - *maktab*)

کتَاب (book – *kitaab*)

دَرْس (lesson – *dars*)

درَسَ (studied – *darasa*)
Impact on Arabic reading processes

**Vowelised script (novice/poor readers)**

- Reliance on:
  - Phonological processing (each word has semantic autonomy)
  - (Some priming assistance from sentence context)

**Unvowelised script (good readers)**

- Reliance on:
  - Prior knowledge of word morphology (attention to consonants)
  - Sentence context (lack of semantic autonomy)
Cross-linguistic effects

Transfer to reading in L2

- Five vowel letters, but 20 vowel sounds – lack of awareness
- Too much to process ➔ ‘vowel blindness’
- Importance of English vowels
- Default dependence on consonants leads to confusion
# Cross-linguistic effects

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<tr>
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</table>

Adapted from Ryan and Meara (1991:532)
Cross-linguistic effects

Transfer to reading in L2

- English spelling
  - lack of regularity
    - cheese, chord, yacht, chef; easy, ear, earth
  - lack of consistency
    - trip, rip, lip
    - heal, plead, dream / head, dealt, dreamt / learner, heart, steak
  - nation, national, nationality; compete, competitive, competition

- L1 processing skill of using context may mask difficulties in word recognition
Implications

- word recognition alongside higher level processing
- awareness of phonological representation
- spelling patterns
- learners’ background
- exposure to English texts
- further research


References

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