

# The Impact of Diglossia on the Language Development and Educational Achievement of Saudi Students in Primary Schools

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## Abstract

Arabic is a diglossic language. Two variants of Arabic are widely used. H (the High variant) is Classical Arabic, now referred to as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The L (Low) variant is the colloquial dialects (DA), which are mostly spoken. The H variant is used in education, press, and other formal correspondence. The Low version is associated with informal contexts. Interestingly, the two versions are completely different from each other in terms of vocabulary, syntax, and even structure. Given the social and cognitive aspects of the language, children go to primary schools with almost no knowledge of MSA. Despite the prolific literature on the linguistic features of Arabic diglossia, very little has been done on the impact of diglossia on academic and educational achievement. In light of this argument, this paper seeks to investigate the teachers' perceived impact of diglossia on the language development and educational achievement of primary school students from a linguistic and anthropological perspective. Interviews were conducted with selected primary school teachers from the Riyadh region of Saudi Arabia to elicit their opinions and perception on how diglossia should be tackled when students arrive in a classroom. The data collection tool was an interview comprising close and open-ended questions. The interview questions explored three areas: teachers' perception of diglossia; perceived challenges that students faced with teaching and study material; and how teachers addressed these challenges. Findings indicate that diglossia poses serious sociolinguistic challenges to most young learners in Saudi schools. Both teachers and learners face difficulties in using only MSA in classrooms as the formal and official medium of instruction in Saudi schools. It is recommended thus the colloquial and vernacular dialects (L varieties) of Arabic should be integrated into the instruction mode to reflect the linguistic reality of the Arab countries.

**Keywords:** Arabic, academic achievement, diglossia, linguistic anthropology, primary school students, (MSA) Modern Standard Arabic

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the study of the relationship between language and education from a linguistic anthropological perspective. Linguistic anthropologists have been concerned with exploring the impact of the social functions and historical properties of language as well as its various contexts on learners' literacy and academic achievement (Corbett, 2022; Levinson & Pollock, 2016). The premise is that language, and language learning cannot be separated from anthropologic fieldwork (Esler, 2019). In this regard, understanding cultural, historical, and social aspects of language can be usefully used in addressing the linguistic challenges of the learners; therefore, numerous anthropological projects addressed the impacts of different issues, including diglossia, language contact, language loss, language maintenance, language planning, and linguistic diversity on language learning and education (Levinson & Pollock, 2016). This study is concerned with the relationship between diglossia and education in Arabic. It seeks to investigate the impact of diglossia on the language development and educational achievement of Saudi students in primary schools.

Diglossia was first coined by the French linguist William Marçais in 1930 and later gained popularity with the efforts of Ferguson (1959), who identified four languages, including Arabic, where diglossia was prevalent. He asserted in Arabic that there are two varieties, 'High' or 'H' contrasted with 'Low' or 'L,' which have coexistence under the name of diglossia. While Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the High variety, confined to literary works, press, and government documents, the dialectal variety of the Arabic language is less formal and more colloquial (Bassiouny, 2020; Bassiouny & Walters, 2020). In other words, diglossia in Arabic represents the contrast between the school version (H variety) and the informal (day-to-day) communication version (L variety), which is acquired by children as the mother tongue (Albirini, 2016; Jdetawy, 2020; Towairesh, 2020). A debate has always existed, highlighting the question that when the H variety (MSA) is not a mother tongue (L1) of any of these young learners, nor it is accessible to any of them prior to schooling, how it can be a language to achieve the desired learning outcomes or academic attainment? In light of this argument, this study is an examination of the relationship between diglossia and literacy or academic achievement with a focus on the Arabic language. This study seeks to explore the impact of Arabic diglossia on young learners who usually do not have any knowledge of the H variety when they join the primary schools and are only exposed to the dialectal or colloquial one. To put it simply, this study seeks to answer this research question: "What is the impact of diglossia on the language development and educational achievement of the Saudi students in the primary schools?"

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Part 2 is a brief survey of the relationship between Arabic diglossia and education. Part 3 discusses the methodology adopted in this study, which was a qualitative content analysis of interviews of six primary teachers using the deductive approach and presenting the data with data elicitation techniques. Part 4 reports the participants' responses to the interview questions. Part 5 analyzes, discusses, and interprets the interview data transcripts. Part 6 is the conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

Numerous studies have been concerned with exploring the impact of diglossia on education and illiteracy in different Arabic-speaking countries (Saiegh-Haddad, Laks, & McBride, 2022). These studies have sought to answer the question of whether diglossia has any negative role in the poor scholastic achievements of Arab learners, especially in primary schools. Maamouri (1998) was the first linguist to raise the issue of low results due to the wide gap between dialectal Arabic (DA) and MSA. He drew attention to the excessive use of the colloquial language and encouraged non-formal educational activities, a diglossic situation. Although the colloquial DA is acquired first by Arab speakers, the unfamiliarity and non-acceptance of MSA in academic situations has caused many problems for educators and academicians. Most curriculum setting is in MSA, but teaching is usually in DA. Courses that should be delivered in MSA are explained in DA to help students understand and acquire their meaning. Haeri (2000) agrees that in Arab schools, teachers often switch to DA to monitor classroom activities or to explain a lesson in the dialect to ensure comprehension. He adds that teachers often justify their choices, saying that MSA is not anybody's mother tongue and young pupils are not exposed to it through any orientation or formal learning prior to joining the school. Since the DA is the true mother tongue of these children, it is easier to communicate, interact with the students, and explain lessons. In this regard, the use of two language varieties in the classrooms creates many problems and has negative influences on both their acquisition of MSA and academic achievement. Accordingly, early exposure to MSA is considered the only solution (Haeri, 2000; Maamouri, 1998). Defenders of the use of MSA also have the belief that it is the best and most perfect language because it is the language of the Quran, believed by Muslims to be the words of God. For this reason, teachers are required to emphasize that Arab and Muslim identities cannot be separated. Some scholars assert that teachers and students should be urged and even forced to use only standard forms of the language in classrooms to keep the language of the Quran. Students should be warned that with the death of Standard Arabic, they would lose the meaning of the Quran (Al-Huri, 2014).

Other linguists, in contrast, have stressed the importance of using the colloquial and vernacular DA in the classrooms. The underlying principle is that if schools or teachers are pressured to use only standard forms of the language in primary schools, it will create obstacles, and hence teaching through colloquial and vernacular DA is the best choice (Poyas & Bawardi, 2018). Teaching in DA will not only be less challenging for the young learners, but it will be easier to acquire the reading and writing skills in a language similar to the one with which they had grown up (Hamzaoui, 2021). It is even suggested that textbooks, teaching, and learning resources can be delivered in DA. Vernacular dialects have nothing to do with the Quran and the Muslim faith. Educators should think of language change as an inevitable phenomenon and not a threat to Islam and Quran (Wahba, England, & Taha, 2017).

According to Hamzaoui (2021), diglossia and the choice of language forms affect the learning process of the pupils in the primary schools in Algeria. She suggests that low levels of accomplishment are mostly due to the complexities

of the literary language used in formal education and the variety of colloquial forms reserved for non-formal circumstances.

In light of these contradicting views, I investigate how the Arabic diglossia impacts young learners' academic achievements at primary levels in Saudi Arabia. It also is necessary to examine obstacles and suggest solutions through conducting interviews with selected teachers in the primary schools in the Riyadh region.

### 3. Methodology

This study is based on an interview with six primary school teachers in the Riyadh Province of Saudi Arabia. The rationale is that teachers have first-hand experiences with the impact of diglossia on the academic achievement of the students and their progress. This ethnographic study reflects my observation and the socio-cultural phenomena of the issue under study. The participants were informed about the purposes of the study and written informed consent was taken before participating. Table 1 presents their demographic information.

Table 1. Demographic details of the participants

<i>Gender</i>	<b>Number of Males</b>	<b>Number of Females</b>		
	4	2		
<i>Years of Experience</i>	<b>0-5 Yrs</b>	<b>6-10 Yrs</b>	<b>11-15 Yrs</b>	<b>16 +</b>
	1	2	1	2
<i>Qualifications</i>	<b>BA</b>	<b>MA</b>	<b>PhD</b>	<b>Other</b>
	3	1	1	1
<i>Subject</i>	<b>Arabic &amp; Islamic</b>	<b>Mathematics</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Other</b>
	2	1	1	2

The interview comprised of 10 questions, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Interview questions

- 1- What language variety (Standard or colloquial vernacular Arabic) do you use in your communication with your students in classrooms?
- 2- What language variety (Standard or colloquial vernacular Arabic) do you use in delivering and explaining the lessons?
- 3- What language variety (Standard or colloquial vernacular Arabic) do your students use either for academic or non-academic purposes?
- 4- What language variety (Standard or colloquial vernacular Arabic) do you think to be the best option for teaching and delivering lessons for primary students?
- 5- Did any of your students attend preparatory (orientation) classes in MSA before joining the school?
- 6- Do you think learners who attended preparatory (orientation) classes perform better at school?
- 7- Do you think early exposure to MSA in primary schools has positive or negative impacts on students' progress and academic attainment?
- 8- Do you think there is any relationship between diglossia and students' scores in your classes?
- 9- Generally, do you find it difficult linguistically to communicate with your students due to diglossia?
- 10- Do you think challenges related to diglossia remain unresolved in Saudi primary schools?

A total of six teachers were asked the same set of questions. The interview transcripts were prepared to apply the method of manual coding to summarize the content of all responses and identify some underlying themes.

### 4. Findings

This section summarizes the participants' responses to the interview questions. First, the participants were asked whether they use MSA or DA in their communication with their students. The majority of the participants (N=4) indicated that they use DA for everyday communication. One participant explained that it would be silly to greet students and send them welcome messages or notes at the beginning of the class using MSA. They think that colloquial forms create some sort of affinity with the students. Another teacher indicated that he tried to use only MSA in his first meetings with the students without good results. Nevertheless, the majority of the participants (N=4) revealed that they used a mixture of MSA and DA during the classroom to deliver lectures, as their priority is learners' comprehension of lessons. They indicated that books and learning materials are produced and written in MSA; therefore, they have to use a mix of the two versions of Arabic in order to help students understand the content. Another revealed that it is challenging for the students to understand the mathematics problems written in MSA. Therefore, she has to use an accessible form of language. On the other hand, two participants (teachers of Arabic and Islamic studies) indicated that they use only MSA in their classes. They explained that the sole use of MSA in classrooms is key for the students' acquisition of MSA, which is not usually acquired before joining the school.

Regarding the students, all the participants revealed that students usually use a mix of the two versions of Arabic (i.e. the H and L variants) to express themselves. However, they all stressed that students have difficulties in using and understanding MSA. It is not surprising, thus, that the majority of the participants had been favoring DA as a medium of instruction and wishing to delay the use of standard forms for higher grades. However, there was a clear difference of opinion. Three participants (50%) opposed idea of using DA permanently as a medium of instruction. According to them, using a mix of the two varieties of Arabic should remain the optimal option to ensure the understanding of lessons until the middle school.

The participants were then asked whether their students attended any introductory courses in MSA before joining the primary school. In Saudi Arabia, traditionally, some children are sent to traditional schools where they learn the Arabic alphabet and read and recite the Quran. These traditional schools were known as *Qutab*. These schools teach only the standard forms of language, the language of the Quran. Only one participant revealed that a few of his learners joined some of these schools, which indicates the decline of the role of these schools in the Saudi society now. Furthermore, the majority of the participants (N=4) believed that attending such schools is not useful for the students in their acquisition of the standard forms of language and academic progress. They explained that such schools are primarily concerned with Quran studies, and their focus is, in most cases, on the Quranic discourse, where many of its vocabularies are not used in everyday communication or even in MSA. In this regard, the majority of the participants stressed that early exposure to MSA in primary schools has negative impacts on students' progress and academic attainment.

At the last stage of the interview, the participants were asked whether there was any relationship between diglossia and students' achievement in their classes. Interestingly, all of the participants agreed that there is a close relationship between diglossia and students' scores in their classrooms. They marked diglossia as one of the most important factors that account for the low marks of the students. They explained that assignments and assessments have to be conducted using MSA, which is not usually understood by primary students. During exams, it is not allowed for teachers to explain the questions to the students, so many of the students have difficulties with understanding the questions, which has negative impacts on the students' scores. Accordingly, the majority of the participants believe that challenges related to diglossia remain unresolved in Saudi primary schools. They explained that the regulations of the Ministry of Education regarding the MSA in course designs, book production, and students' evaluations and assessments add to the complexity of the issue.

## 5. Discussion

The findings indicate clearly that diglossia is a major issue that needs to be extensively studied in the learning contexts in the Arab countries. The participants indicated clearly that diglossia poses serious challenges to both teachers and learners in Saudi primary schools. The responses of the participants reflect clearly that both teachers are divided between the importance of using the standard forms of language, which represent the formal channels of course design, book production, and learning materials on the one hand, and the importance of using accessible language that enables students with understanding the course contents. For the majority of participants, switching to DA was the only way for the teachers; otherwise, most students would not attain any expected learning outcomes.

The findings of the study reflect clearly the conflict between the H and L varieties of Arabic. The conflict that both teachers and learners face between the use of the standard and non-standard forms of language are deeply rooted in the historical developments of Arabic. For many educators, religious leaders, and speakers of Arabic, MSA alone should be used in learning contexts, and DA should be considered the L variety of language and should not be promoted or given any significance. They believe that the lack of using MSA will ultimately lead to the death of the language of the Quran (Suleiman, 2011). This ongoing debate means that deciding the medium of instruction in Saudi schools goes beyond students' needs and language potentials; it has to do with other issues such as identity and religious beliefs. In this regard, approaching the issue of diglossia in learning contexts should be conducted within an integrated linguistic ethnographic framework that takes into consideration the different sociolinguistic variables and aspects of the issue.

The findings of the study agree with the bulk of the Arabic diglossia literature, in the sense that diglossia in Arabic has clear implications for learning contexts in the Arab world (Abdelhay, Makoni, & Severo, 2020; Hamzaoui, 2021; Saiegh-Haddad et al., 2022; Sayahi, 2014).

## 6. Conclusion

This paper addressed the impact of Arabic diglossia on the academic achievement of students in Saudi primary schools. For this purpose, interviews were conducted with six teachers who represent different backgrounds and

school subjects in the Saudi schools.

From the information gathered from these interviews, I conclude that diglossia has a negative impact on the academic achievement and progress of the students in the primary schools in Saudi Arabia, attributed to the significant changes between the H and L varieties of Arabic. Furthermore, the functions of the two variants are completely different. It is thus challenging for the students at the primary level to become familiar with MSA easily. It was also obvious that the religious and cultural beliefs of the teacher participants have a significant influence on their choice of the instruction mode. I recommend that DA (the L variety) be incorporated into the instruction modes in the Saudi primary schools. Educators and religious leaders should reconsider the issue of diglossia in Arab countries. Diglossia should be seen as a language and social reality. The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia should adopt more flexible language policies that take into consideration linguistic, political, and social changes with their implications for learning contexts. Finally, the study has clear implications for language planning research in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries.

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