

# Arabic Language Literacy as an All-Important Aid in English Language Teaching to Arabic-Speaking Students

Hassan Al-Haj Ibrahim<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Al-Baath University, Syria

Correspondence: Hassan Al-Haj Ibrahim, Al-Baath University, Syria.

doi:10.56397/JARE.2024.05.01

## Abstract

Current research points to the importance of native language literacy in the development of second language literacy. Knowledge and skills transfer across languages from the mother tongue to the second language. But such knowledge and skills will only transfer if they have been thoroughly learned.

Due to the low standard of Arabic proficiency among both English teachers and learners, literacy in Arabic is not made use of in developing literacy in English. In particular, the teaching of English could greatly benefit from the use of Arabic grammatical and phonetic concepts that are not sufficiently developed in English grammar and language. Only a select number of such concepts are reviewed in this paper to serve as indicators of the advantages to be gained by a deeper study and knowledge of Arabic language phonetics and grammar.

**Keywords:** ESL, English language teaching, language literacy, Arabic literacy

## 1. Introduction

1) It has long been known that there are universal aspects of literacy that transfer across languages. Attahtawi (2003), a Nineteenth century Egyptian scholar, affirms that mastering one language thoroughly means mastering potentially all other languages. At their core, all languages share common grammatical structures and concepts. Furthermore, the presence of universal aspects of literacy that occur in all languages is currently supported by a growing consensus among linguists. Several studies have been conducted in support of the universality of literacy development in different

languages. According to Goodman, "the reading process will be similar for all languages with variations to accommodate the specific characteristics of orthography used and the grammatical structures of the language".

Results of current research indicate that readers of languages as different as Spanish, Polish and Chinese produce the same kinds of miscues. Furthermore, research findings suggest that the reading and writing processes function similarly for native and second language learners.

2) Due to these universal aspects of literacy, the transfer of literacy skills from one language to another is made possible. Learning a second

language requires a basic understanding of one's own language. Concepts and intellectual skills learned in one language are equally relevant to the ability to function in a second language. Research supports the theory that second language learners transfer native literacy skills into second language reading and writing in an interactive, reciprocal process. Cummins (1989) explains that: "although the surface aspects (e.g., pronunciation, fluency, etc.) of different languages are clearly separate, there is an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency which is common across languages. This 'common underlying proficiency' makes possible the transfer of cognitive/academic or literacy-related skills across languages."

Similarly, in addressing the universal aspects of writing, Conner and Kaplan indicate that writing requires cognitive planning, problem-solving, and learning strategies that, once learned in the native language, can be transferred to learning a second language.

3) This fact of the possibility of literacy transfer across languages points to the importance of native language literacy in the development of second language literacy. Knowledge and skills transfer across languages from the mother tongue to the second language. From the point of view of the development of concepts and thinking skills, the two languages are interdependent. The development of vocabulary and concepts in the mother tongue is the best preparation for learning the second language and people with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in the second language.

4) The question of solid foundation in the first language must be stressed at this point. Concepts and skills in literacy in one language will only transfer if they have been completely learned. Cummins (1981, 1989) calls this "the threshold hypothesis" and asserts that native language literacy can only transfer to a second language when students have reached a critical threshold in their native language.

In support of Cummins' threshold hypothesis, many studies were undertaken, including a study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education and a study by Thomas and Collier (1996). Their findings confirmed that the amount of time to reach full proficiency in English is significantly enhanced when students have academic competency and literacy in their

native language. It was also found that students with the highest levels of native language literacy were those who eventually became the strongest readers in their second language. It was concluded that the single best predictor of second language reading proficiency for second language learners is native language literacy.

5) A final remark that needs to be pointed out concerning transfer across languages is that such a transfer may and can be a two-way process. The study of a second language teaches a lot about one's own language as well. The concepts and literacy skills that are acquired in learning a second language can transfer to the mother tongue, and both languages can nurture each other when access is permitted to them both. Students use their native language literacy skills and strategies to become literate in the second language, and what is learned in the second language enhances native language literacy. The acquirement and study of foreign languages is deemed by Goethe as necessary to the knowledge and proficiency in one's own native language; Goethe says<sup>1</sup>: *Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiß nichts von seiner eigenen.*

6) The strong and positive correlations between literacy in the native and second languages stressed above apply equally to learning English by Arabic speakers as well as to learning other languages. The knowledge of Arabic should be of great help and assistance to the teaching of a second language such as English to Arabic speakers.

In support of the transferability of native language literacy skills into English, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD, 1987) indicates: "In fact, it is clear that the ability to transfer to English what is learned in the first language applies not only to content-area subjects like science, math, but also to skills in reading and writing — even when the orthographic system is quite different from the Roman alphabet..."

In a study conducted on a sample of 112 students in Qatar, a correlation coefficient of 0.53 was found for the aggregate comprehension scores in the Arabic and English fluency instruments indicating a considerable degree of correspondence between the two scores (Jonathon C. McCollum, 2012). Further, a correlation coefficient of 0.61 was obtained

---

<sup>1</sup> Maximen und Reflexionen.

between reported extensive Arabic reading and English reading fluency (Jonathon C. McCollum, 2012).

Writing skills and abilities as well as reading fluency can be positively transferred from the native language to the target language, although writing abilities may be harder to transfer from one language to another in certain cases as demonstrated for example by a study conducted on Japanese and Chinese students learning English (Carson, J., Carrell, P., Silberstein, S., Kroll, B. & Kuehn, P, 1990). This may be related to the special nature of the writing systems in Japanese and Chinese as literacy skills transfer may vary for different language groups. Studies conducted on speakers of Arabic and other languages such as Spanish and French do support the contention of writing skills transferability between languages. In one study conducted on the effect of Arabic proficiency on the English writing of Jordanian students, it was concluded that Arabic writing skills can be positively transferred to English. The study revealed a significant relationship between the students' proficiency in Arabic writing and English writing. The authors go on to say: "Results of the study indicate that there is a need for integrating the instruction of writing skill between the two languages in textbooks so that the writing level of students in L2 (English) can be improved." (Dweik, B. & Abu Al Hommos, M, 2007).

In conclusion it can be stated that the teaching of English to Arabic speakers should be based on foundations of the knowledge of Arabic and the literacy skills acquired in that language. The development of Arabic language skills should play a pivotal role in the acquisition of English language by Arab learners of English.

## **2. English Language Learning by Arabic-Speaking Students**

It is no secret, however, that Arabic speakers are often at a disadvantage vis-à-vis speakers of other languages in regard to their ability to learn English. This is nowhere apparent than in English language classes with students speaking different languages. One cannot help but notice that Arabic speakers are often badly off as compared to speakers of other languages.

Many reasons could be cited for this sorry state of affairs, but the main culprit, as I see it, is the low standard of Arabic proficiency among Arab learners of English. As a consequence, literacy in

Arabic is not made use of in developing literacy in English. In fact, most Arab students learn English as if they were completely illiterate. An American teacher of English working in Qatar relates his frustration at his failure to teach English to his Arabic-speaking students and improve their reading abilities in English. "Persisting in my position while my students, even some of my very brightest, seemed destined for failure sapped my strength and weakened my spirit. My once razor-sharp teaching skills seemed blunted, my optimism dulled, I came to the realization that I and my other American colleagues were ill-equipped to train our students to achieve academic reading fluency because they required more elemental literacy training in their first language (L1) before they could reach such elevated goals in their second language (L2)." (McCollum, J, 2012).

Furthermore, the advantages that can accrue from the knowledge of Arabic are completely ignored by Arab teachers and students of English alike. Although Arabic Grammar abounds with grammatical concepts that are not sufficiently developed in English grammar, no use whatsoever is ever made of such Arabic terms and concepts as aids to second language teaching. This is a serious error of omission. In this paper, a limited selection of such Arabic concepts that could greatly benefit Arab students of English are reviewed, particularly in the fields of grammar and phonetics.

## **3. Useful Arabic Grammatical Concepts**

1) Arabic grammar abounds with many grammatical concepts that have been developed by Arabic grammarians throughout the long history of Arabic grammar. Many of these concepts have not been sufficiently developed in English grammar. Unfortunately, such concepts, which could be put to advantage in the service of teaching English to Arabic-speaking students, have so far been neglected and needlessly ignored.

One could think of many grammatical concepts that could be utilized for explaining and refining grammatical points in English in general and particularly for Arab learners of English. However, only a select number of such concepts can be cited and reviewed in this paper. These are meant to serve as indicators of the advantages to be gained in this regard by a deeper study and knowledge of Arabic language

and grammar.

2) Sentences in Arabic grammar are normally classified according to whether they start with a noun or a verb into nominal and verbal sentences. Although no such distinction is ever made in English, such a concept could easily and most advantageously be used for explaining the structure of English sentences and clauses, since most, if not all, sentences in English are in fact of the nominal clause type.

Nominal clauses in English consist for the most part of two phrases: a noun phrase and a verb phrase, where the noun phrase comes first and is the subject and the verb phrase comes later and is the predicate.

The subject refers in English grammar to a noun or a pronoun etc. about which a statement is to be made by a predicate. It is normally mistranslated in Arabic as Fa'il (فاعل) (agent or doer of action) even in sentences where it is apparent that it is no Fa'il (فاعل) or agent at all. In fact, the only proper Arabic equivalent of "Subject" is what is termed in Arabic grammar "المُسْنَدُ إِلَيْهِ" (Musnad ilayh). It may refer to a مبتدأ (Mubtada) in nominal clauses as in: "Snow is white", or it may be a Fa'il (فاعل) equivalent in some verbal clauses such as: "The boy hit the ball", or to a Na'ib fa'il (نائب فاعل) equivalent in other verbal clauses as in: "The ball was hit by the boy", where the subject, "the ball", is not a fa'il فاعل but a na'ib fa'il نائب فاعل or a surrogate agent, for the actual agent or doer of the action is still the boy and not the ball. The fact that in English and other Indo-European languages most sentences start with a noun phrase clearly indicates that Mubtada المبتدأ would be a much more appropriate translation for "Subject" than Fa'il فاعل. In both verbal sentences quoted above, the subject, whether "the boy" or "the ball", is in fact a Mubtada مبتدأ, similar to the Mubtada مبتدأ in the nominal sentence. Musnad ilayh المسند إليه remains, however, the better and more general translation. I suggest that better understanding of the role and significance of the subject in English would be realized by borrowing and making use of such Arabic grammatical terms as Fa'il فاعل, Na'ib Fa'il نائب فاعل or Mubtada مبتدأ. In particular, the distinction between the subject as fa'il فاعل and the subject as Na'ib fa'il نائب فاعل can be very helpful in elucidating the structure of the passive and active voices in English.

From what has already been said, it becomes

evident that the predicate is in fact Sanad or Musnad المُسْنَدُ or السَّنَدُ, as it is sometimes called. It may be considered a Khabar خبر with a difference, for Khabar الخبر in Arabic may be a noun whereas the predicate in English is a verb phrase.

It is thus clear that analysis of English clauses making use of Arabic grammatical concepts can be extremely helpful and can lead to a better understanding of English structures, particularly for Arabic speaking students already familiar with such concepts in their native language.

#### 4. Phonetics

1) A second area where English language teaching may greatly benefit from a thorough knowledge of Arabic is phonetics. Modern teachers of English phonetics are totally and completely ignorant of Arabic phonetics and are incapable therefore of putting to service the work and achievements of Arabic phoneticians. The study of phonetics in Arabic is known to Arabic linguists as Tajweed تجويد. Most people associate this study with the recitation of the Quran. The general nature and applicability of this science are thereby not appreciated. Although a thorough study of this point is beyond the scope of this paper, mention may be made of at least some aspects that are relevant to the current subject on hand.

2) It is a well-known fact that the letters as used in English do not represent phonemes and are not phonetic symbols or حروف in the proper sense of the word. A "vowel" for example may be used in English as a vowel, properly speaking or as a long vowel (حرف مد) or short vowel (حركة) as used in Arabic, or, as it is more often the case, it may be used to represent several vowels, making its use superfluous in many cases. The vowel "a" for example is pronounced differently in such words as: woman, father, fate, fall etc. Further, the "vowel" may be used also as a consonant in words such as "University" or "one". It may also be used as equivalent to a glottal stop (hamza الهمزة) at the beginning of words such as under, apple, on, etc.

3) The use of the stress is very important in English. By stress is often meant the emphasis or greater relative force of utterance given to a syllable or a word. The position of the stress determines in many cases the meaning of a word or sentence. Stressing the first part of the word "Object" makes it a noun meaning a thing,



but stressing the second part of the same word makes it a verb with a totally different meaning. However, this is not the only way in which the stress is used in English. In many cases the only effect of stressing a vowel is to make it longer, or in Arabic terms to transform a short vowel (حركة) into a long vowel (حرف مد). In two-syllable words which may serve as nouns or verbs, stressing the first syllable makes them nouns whereas stressing the second syllable makes them verbs. What is involved in stressing the second syllable is often no more than lengthening its vowel. As examples we may mention words such as: 'Produce (پرنٹیس) and Pro'duce (پرنٹیوس), where the short, or unstressed vowel, in the second syllable (یُس) is transformed into a long, or stressed vowel (یوس), in the second word. Similar groups of words include 'export and ex'port, 'record and re'cord etc.

4) The diphthong as defined in English is a union of two vowels pronounced as one syllable. It is a complex vowel sound in which the first vowel is gradually raised by a second vowel so that both vowels form one syllable. No such concept is found, or needed, in Arabic. The concept of the diphthong would however be greatly simplified and brought home to Arabic learners of English by simply stating this concept in familiar Arabic terms. The diphthong in fact is no more than the consonants "Y" or "W" preceded by a vowel. It is not actually a union of two vowels properly speaking, for the first so-called vowel is in fact a consonantal "y" or "w". A useful definition of the diphthong in Arabic would be something like this:

هو الياء أو الواو إذا كانتا ساكنتين وتحرك ما قبلهما حركة ليست منهما أو سبقهما حرف مد .

Examples of the diphthong in Arabic include such words as بايْت (bayt), ثاوب (thaub) and شاي (Shai). In English, we have words such as:

Brine: ياء ساكنة تسبقها ألف

Day: ياء ساكنة تسبقها ألف مماله

Late: ياء ساكنة خفيه تسبقها ألف مماله

Boy: ياء ساكنة تسبقها واو ثقيله أعجمية (و)

Brown: واو ساكنة تسبقها ألف

Note: واو ساكنة خفيه تسبقها واو ثقيله أعجمية (و)

5) The glottal stop (hamza همزة) is a distinct phoneme in Arabic, where it is always pronounced distinctly. The symbol increasingly being used for it is a dotless question mark (؟).

In Arabic, the glottal stop at the beginning of a word is normally referred to as a hiatus or diaeresis (from a Greek word (διαίρεσις), meaning division, separation or distinction) (Hamzat qat' همزة قطع). In formal English this sound is only met with in certain words in which there are two adjacent vowels that are pronounced separately and not as digraph or diphthong, such as re-examine, co-op, cooperate, coordinate etc. A diacritical mark consisting of two dots (") placed over the vowel is sometimes used to indicate that the vowel is to be pronounced as a glottal stop and separately from the preceding vowel, for example coöperate. Such a practice may be considered obsolete or archaic in English. However, even in such cases the glottal stop is sometimes dropped and transformed into a compound vowel (for example, 'kəʊp). This phenomenon is also to be found in Arabic where the glottal stop is replaced in certain dialects or words by a vowel such as w or y.

In certain English dialects, on the other, such as the Cockney dialect in London, the reverse is observed where some letters, mainly t and h, are glottalized, i.e. they are pronounced as a glottal stop. Such words as butter and letter are pronounced as baʔah بَاءْ and laʔah لَاءْ. Similarly words with h are glottalized, as in how and house pronounced aow (aʊ) أَوْ and aous (aʊs) أَوْس.

English speakers use glottal stops unawares in words beginning with a vowel such as it, is, ate, aunt, our etc, but when this word is preceded by another word the glottal stop if unstressed is dropped and the vowel returns to being a proper vowel, as in: it is, pronounced it is (itis) without a break or a hiatus between the two words. Most Arab learners of English would say: it is, with a hiatus, not being aware of this rule in English regarding the initial unstressed glottal stop. This kind of initial unstressed glottal stop is known in Arabic as elision glottal stop (hamzat wasl همزة وصل). Historically, the unstressed glottal stop at the beginning of many English words have been dropped altogether, a phenomenon known as Aphesis (Table 1).

**Table 1.**

Old form	New form
Abackward	Backward
Acute	Cute

Alone	Lone
Avoid	Void
Especially	Specially
Esquire	Squire
Example	Sample

The availability of the concept of الهمزة or glottal stop in Arabic is not made use of in teaching English to Arabic speakers. The concepts of hiatus (همزة القطع) and initial glottal stop همزة الوصل could have been utilized most advantageously for explaining English pronunciation. Arab students of English are often at a loss to explain the rules of, for example, the use of “thā” (ثَ) and “thi” (ثِ) or the use of “a” and “an”. Students for example are told that “a” is used before a consonant and “an” is used before a vowel. This is not always the case, as we all know, for we say “a university” and “a one” and “an hour” although we are told that “u” and “o” are vowels and h is a consonant.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that the facts considered so far demonstrate conclusively that making use of Arabic grammatical and phonetic concepts can be extremely helpful in the teaching of English to Arabic speaking students and can lead to better understanding of English language and structures. Furthermore, the low standard of English learning and teaching among Arab students is partly to be attributed to the fact that literacy in Arabic is not made use of in developing literacy in English. The remedy that may be suggested in order to alleviate the harm consequent upon this state of affairs is both simple as well as effective; for it calls only for better understanding and teaching of Arabic in order to improve beyond measure Arab understanding and appreciation of English.

## References

- Attahtawi, R. (2003). *Takhlees ul-ibreez*. 1st ed. Abu Dhabi: Suwaidi.
- Carson, J., Carrell, P., Silberstein, S., Kroll, B. and Kuehn, P. (1990). Reading-Writing Relationships in First and Second Language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 24(2), p. 245. DOI: 10.2307/3586901
- Cummins, J. (1981). *The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students, Schooling and*

*language minority students: A theoretical framework*. Los Angeles: Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University.

- Cummins, J. (1989). *Empowering minority students*. 1st ed. Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Dweik, B. and Abu Al Hommos, M. (2007). *The Effect of Arabic Proficiency on the English Writing of Bilingual Jordanian Students*.
- Jonathon C. McCollum. (2012). The Correlation of Arab ELLs’ Academic Reading Fluency in Arabic and English, M.A. thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University, p. 3, 38.
- McCollum, J. (2012). *The Correlation of Arab ELLs’ Academic Reading Fluency in Arabic and English*. M.A. Brigham Young University, p. 3.