



Phonics

Background

The summary below presents the research evidence on phonics in the Arab world. The Teaching & Learning Toolkit focuses on impact on outcomes for learners; it presents an estimate of the average impact of phonics on learning progress, based on the synthesis of a large number of quantitative studies from around the world.

This page offers a summary and analysis of individual studies on phonics in the Arab world. In contrast to the Toolkit it includes studies which do not estimate impact, but instead investigate the challenges of Arabic language learning and implementation of interventions that could improve reading abilities and decoding skills for Arabic native speakers' pupils. This information is valuable for school leaders and teachers interested in finding out more about particular examples of phonics interventions that have been delivered in an Arabic context.



Summary of the research in the Arab world

Learning to read Arabic has usually posed a challenge for native speakers due to many reasons including the diglossic features of the language and the visual characteristics of Arabic orthography (Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2012). The various spoken dialects of Arabic language (SAV) and the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) are linguistically linked despite some syntactic and phonological differences or distance between them (Saiegh-Haddad, 2005). The linguistic distance between the formal (Modern Standard Arabic) and spoken language that makes it hard for children to rely on the phonologic representations they have for the words in the spoken language (Asaad & Eviatar, 2014). This distance increases or decreases based on the degree to which children are exposed to MSA before entering the school (Saiegh-Haddad et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2016). Despite the co-existence of different Arabic dialects, speakers of Arabic from all over the world, are expected to read, write, and formally communicate in the “Modern Standard Arabic” (MSA). Hence, it is believed that early and frequent oral exposure to MSA (for instance: through listening to stories, songs, cartoons and other forms of oral exposure) will develop learners’ MSA knowledge, and reading comprehension (Saiegh-Haddad, 2005; Saiegh-Haddad et al, 2011; Taha-Thomure, 2019).

Other challenges for learning the Arabic language are related to the presence of many visual and phonological neighbors among the letters. Meaning that, many Arabic letters share a basic form, and differ only by the placement and number of dots example: ت، ث، ب. Furthermore, the complexity of the relations between the graphemes and phonemes causes another challenge for Arabic language learners. For example: 23 of the 29 letters in the Arabic alphabet have four shapes each (word initial, medial, final, and when they follow a non-connecting letter. As such, different graphemes representing the same phoneme and similar graphemes represent different phonemes.

To date, there is substantial body of evidence suggesting that a significant number of children around the Arab world and particularly in lower elementary grades experience difficulties in reading school-related materials and demonstrating a sufficient level of comprehension (Asadi, 2018; Elhoweris et al., 2018; Taha-Thomure, 2017). This is because these pupils have weak levels of reading fluency and decoding skills (Asadi, 2018; Hussein, 2014) and phonological



awareness (Asaad & Eviatar, 2014). Improving phonological awareness skills in Arabic language was found to be directly associated to the improvement of learners' reading abilities (Elhoweris et al., 2018). As a result, learners become more aware of the relationship between the letter sounds and the written spelling patterns, or graphemes, which represent them and also gain the ability to decode new words by sounding them.

Research suggested various strategies that could improve reading abilities for Arabic native speakers' pupils:

1. In early grades, it is essential to pay attention to teaching phonemic awareness as an initial requirement to reading fluency. Children first work on the sounds of the letters they are learning at the level of the phoneme (Saiegh-Haddad, 2005).
2. Strengthening auditory comprehension of MSA, for example, by giving simple instructions in MSA instead of in spoken Arabic and exposing young learners to the letters that represent sounds that do not occur in the spoken language, example: ض، ص، ط (Asaad & Eviatar, 2014).
3. Exposure to the letters should begin early (in first grade), with emphasis on letters that represent sounds that do not occur in spoken Arabic (Asaad & Eviatar, 2014). Doing so, would allow children to decode words more easily and to have more resources to enlarge vocabulary (Asaad & Eviatar, 2014).
4. Increasing parental involvement in their children's Arabic learning would improve higher reading skills particularly for low-skilled students (Midraj & Midraj, 2011; Shafiq, 2011). A longitudinal study proved the correlation of home literacy activities in 88 Arabic-speaking children kindergarten with their reading and writing achievement at the end of grade 1 (Aram et al., 2013). As such, research emphasized for schools and communities to strengthen the partnerships with parents and provide them with activities and strategies that they can employ at home to motivate and engage their children in reading (Midraj & Midraj, 2011).
5. Engaging students in literacy-related social activities such as organized extracurricular reading groups nurtured positive perceptions and attitudes towards reading, particularly reading for pleasure, and improved their reading habits (Nasser, 2013).



6. When examining oral reading fluency of 510 bilingual and monolingual native Arabic-speaking sixth-graders (62 bilinguals and 448 monolinguals) in Egypt, Hussein (2014) revealed that learning a second language, English, has a positive effect on oral reading fluency and comprehension in the first language, Arabic (Hussein, 2014). As such, exposing children to L2 will develop their word structure and morphological awareness in their Arabic mother tongue (Taha-Thomure, 2008; Schwartz et al., 2016)
7. Using software to teach reading in Arabic improved students' achievement in reading comprehension and minimized reading aloud and morphological errors when compared with the control group (Al-Musawi et al., 2016). The animations and multimedia tools provided students with the opportunity to visualize the reading texts using the story telling instructional approach which in turn and positively influenced their reading comprehension.

Furthermore, Studies like Elbeheri et al. (2011) provided evidence on the influence of orthographic processing on reading comprehension. This relationship between the two is due to students' ability to distinguish orthographic forms within Arabic written words (Taha, 2016). As such, teachers are advised to train students on phonological decoding skills particularly in a dominant non-vowelized text. Additionally, teachers must do repeated learning activities to build up orthographic representation. Doing so, will develop students' sight word vocabulary and the process to access visual word representations resulting in a better reading fluency.

Similarly, the association of early phonological awareness skills was extensively investigated on developing reading abilities in Arabic. Developing phonological training programs improved the reading performance of linguistic risk pupils (Makhoul, 2017). Dallasheh- Khatib et al. (2014) examined the effect of two training programs (morphological and phonological awareness) on 90 children at kindergarten on the development of their reading abilities in grade 1. It was discovered that at the end of the training, both morphological and phonological awareness were enhanced in comparison with the control group who had no training at all. The phonological training included the use of general sound recognition, rhythms, syllable, and phoneme blending, segmenting. Through linguistic games children were exposed to letters and letter combinations which



represents the sound with which they are dealing. For the morphological training, children were trained with complex words and a variety of affixes such as: (آل-التعريف، تاء التأنيث، الف الاثنين، تاء التانيث)) in nouns and verbs were possible. They also learned the meaning added to a word after adding or removing these morphemes. These children were also trained on how to analyze and synthesize inflections and derivations as well as to recognize the structure of morphological transformations. However, the existing literature around the importance of phonological and morphological awareness as a predictor of a strong reading skills is still incomplete. Research in the Arab world lacks longitudinal studies that could determine developmental patterns and ways to improve reading performance in Arabic (Tibi & Kirby, 2019). When testing the phonological awareness for Arabic language, most researchers used foreign diagnostic tests because to date, the existing phonological awareness tests are not developed in Arabic (Al-Sulaim & Marini, 2017). Hence, there is clear need to develop standardized tests in the Arabic language as well as to create a phonological test that could specifically measure phoneme segmentation, blending phonemes, syllable deletion, and sound deletion (Asaad & Eviaar, 2014).

Lastly, with the emergence of digital technology in learning environments, researchers are recommended to investigate the effects of instructional software on Arabic language skills particularly on those with higher levels of reading difficulties (Al-Musawi et al., 2016). Taking into consideration that the design and implementation of these software should be informed by the standards of the Arabic language and culture.



Summary Paragraph:

The linguistic distance between the formal (Modern standard Arabic) and spoken language that makes it hard for children to rely on the phonologic representations they have for the words in the spoken language. Research within Arabic speaking countries suggests that improving phonological awareness skills in Arabic language is associated to the improvement of learners' reading abilities. A study of government schools within the UAE found that in classes where direct instruction was used to raise phonological awareness, learners became more aware of the relationship between the letter sounds and the written spelling patterns, or graphemes, which represent them and also gain the ability to decode new words by sounding them.

However, the existing literature around the importance of phonological and morphological awareness as a predictor of a strong reading skills is still incomplete. Research in the Arab world lacks longitudinal studies that could determine developmental patterns and ways to improve reading performance in Arabic during formal schooling.



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Databases searched

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Education Source

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Search Terms

Phonics, analytic* phonics, phonology, synthetic phonics, reading instruction, phonemic awareness.