The impact of Arabic on oral language

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to ascertain the detrimental impact of Arabic diglossia on the development of formal language acquisition amongst bilingual students in Lebanon. The participants selected for this correlational research were students enrolled at a private, rural, middle class school, attending kindergarten through grade 6, are considered to be those most affected by inherent challenges to language [L1] acquisition due to significant linguistic differences between the two forms of Arabic. Participants were given to two standardised measures so as to establish the trend of development in oral skills for both classical and colloquial Arabic; determine the grade level at which convergence occurs between the two forms of acquisition; and finally compare the degree of classical Arabic [L1] acquisition with respect to English [L2] as a second language. Results confirm a relationship between Arabic diglossia and late oral development, while students displayed a higher degree of comfort with English than their mother language. The findings call for pressing reform plans regarding instruction of the Arabic language in order to promote better oral language acquisition. Recommendations include research based language instruction strategies in the classroom for the purpose of improving performance and engagement.

Introduction

The Arabic language is characterized by diglossia, an occurrence whereby two varieties of the same language exist (Abu-Rabia 2000; Fedda Darwiche & Oweini, 2012). *Fusha*, or classical Arabic, is a universal standard utilized in both oral and written expressions of formal communication, while *ammiya* is a derivation utilized in colloquial speech (Dakwar-Khamis 2005). Ferguson (1959) describes the comparably stable language state of diglossia in Arabic, Swiss German, Modern Greek, and Haitian Creole as one where two forms are distinguishable. In diglossia, the language possesses a high [H] and low [L] form/value. Classical Arabic represents the high form of Arabic, and is taught in schools for use in all manner of formal communication; while the colloquial low form of the language is reserved for informal speech, acquired in the home through daily social interaction, and dependent on local dialect (Ferguson, 1959; Abu-Rabia, 2000).

Beyond the function that each form of the Arabic language serves and the respective means of acquisition, *fusha* and *ammiya* are furthermore distinguishable

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by their grammatical and phonological divergences (Kaye, 2001; Maamouri, 2007). Ferguson (1959) points to the increased complexity of classical Arabic's grammar when compared to the colloquial low form, while Abu-Rabia (2000) notes the respectively richer syntax and lexicon of the former. In addition to encompassing all the phonological sounds of *ammiya*, classical Arabic includes exclusive

phonemes that Kaye (2001) attributes to historical changes in the language. The most apparent point of differentiation between the two forms is the exclusion of *ammiya* in written expression, resulting in classical Arabic being the only institutionalized form in schools and universities (Zughoul, 1980).

It is within the context of the educational system that the diglossic quality of the Arabic language precipitates a primary sociolinguistic and academic problem facing Arab countries. A wealth of literature demonstrate student difficulties in the acquisition of basic academic skills; mainly due to Arab students' mother tongues differing from the more complex *fusha* form at the earlier stages of their learning (Ayari, 1996; Abu-Rabia, 2000; Saiegh-Haddad, 2003; Dakwar-Khamis, 2005; Maamouri, 2007). Maamari (2005) makes the case that children are dependent on their already existent oral vocabulary when commencing their schooling. Critically, their two to five thousand word vocabulary forms the basis for their acquisition of reading and writing skills. While the development of these abilities in non-diglossic languages like English is a seamless one, Arab students' oral language experience does not provide a comparable platform of transition. Perfetti (2007) highlights the extent to which *fusha* diverges from *ammiya* in form and structure, to the point that any similarities between the variations do not lend themselves to fluid word recognition or facilitate language comprehension. The disparaging chasm between the high and low forms of the language, along with which form is the more habitual in daily usage, lies at the heart of a call for reforming educational policy in the affected region (UNDP 2011). The UNDP states in its Arab Knowledge Report 2010-2011 that the Arab region should be vested in presenting reform plans regarding its education policy if it wishes to invest in its future generations and contribute towards the knowledge society of the 21st century.

Learning complications arising from Arabic Diglossia

The Arabic language is characterized by its diglossic quality, whereby the colloquial derivation is distinctively different from the co-existent formal expression (Ferguson 1959). While students are required to learn how to read and write in the formal/high form of the language, their daily social interactions only serve to foster the low colloquial form irrespective of their education (Maamari, 2005; Farran, Bingham, & Mathews, 2010). Ibrahim (2009) goes as far as stating that the disparity between the two forms of Arabic expression is akin to acquiring two separate languages. Arabic is a Semitic language which derives its alphabetic system from Abjad script. In its pure form, Abjad 'does not rely on vowels and uses written scripts adapted from Sumerian Cuneiform – logographic writing that preceded alphabetic writing' (Farran et al., 2010, p. 8). In its current evolved state, Arabic is composed of 28 letters that include three long vowels, as well as short vowels denoted by diacritics. In certain Arabic education programs, the emphasis is on teaching students to first read and write the vowel-based form of Arabic. Alternatively, this method of teaching is utilized in conjunction with learning the vowel-free form of the language – dependent on Arabic sight words (Oweini & Hazoury 2010).

Existent research into Arabic diglossia uncovers a link between the nature of the language and low educational achievements with respect to Arabic literacy. To investigate the relation between Arabic diglossia and reading comprehension Abu-Rabia (2000) established an experimental study for first and second graders with one group exposed to classical Arabic at a preschool level and a second group only exposed to colloquial Arabic. His findings demonstrated that early exposure to classical Arabic had a positive impact on students' reading comprehension underlying the importance of instruction in formal Arabic at even the earliest stages of learning and language development.

Two studies by Saiegh-Haddad (2003) examining the phonological aspect of Arabic diglossia attest to the difficulties facing students during the early stages of acquisition. In the first instance, Saiegh-Haddad (2003a) found that phonological chasm between the high and low forms of the Arabic language had a negative effect on oral language fluency. In the second instance, he extended these findings with an investigation into the ability of preschoolers and first graders in decoding

phonemes (2003b). By examining phonemic awareness and pseudo-word decoding scores, Saiegh-Haddad found that first graders displayed difficulty in isolating typical phonological structures, irrespective of whether they benefited from preschool exposure to formal language instruction or not. This finding opens the door for further investigation into whether difficulties decoding phonemes manifest at all grade levels or whether the complication abates at a higher level of learning. Further investigation by Saeigh-Haddad et al. (2011) did however demonstrate that preschool students' performance in recognizing classical Arabic phonemes was significantly less than their performance on colloquial test items.

The preceding body of work by Abu-Rabia (2000) and Saeigh-Haddad et al. (2003a, 2003b, 2011) falls in line with studies on oral language and comprehension that are not specific to the Arabic language. Catts (1997) and Snowling (2005) both demonstrate that difficulties in oral language are predictors of future deficiencies in reading comprehension: resulting from limited phonological awareness, difficulties with word retrieval, poor verbal retention, and limited speech production or perception. Additionally, mild difficulties in oral language lead to mild difficulties in reading while major oral language deficiency severely impedes with reading comprehension (Kaiser, Roberts, & McLeod, 2011). The implication for the Arabic language is that, in order for students to develop a high rate of literacy and strengthen their reading comprehension, it is vital that prior attention is given to the high form of oral language since the colloquial form is an inadequate substitute and future reading is dependent on formal expression, phonemes and vocabulary.

The bilingual factor: An imbalanced dynamic

Not confined to internal challenges presented to the Arabic language due to its diglossic quality, the Arab region is also faced with the external encroachment of English and French (Amara, 2010). Several research studies have concluded that there is a gradual loss of the native Arab language among the younger generations, itself a by-product of previous colonization/ protectorate periods as well current globalization (Bassiouney, 2009; Maamouri,

1998; UNDP, 2011). The twentieth century saw an increasing institutionalization of English and French in Arabic schools and universities (Al-Khatib, 2006). This can be directly attributed to periods of colonization by Britain and France, especially in the Middle East following the First World War (Owens, 2001). Depending on the division of territories in the region, English or French was instilled as a second language. Lebanon is a prime example of ingrained bilingualism, with students exposed to either language throughout their 14 years of schooling. The impact of this exposure is compounded by the prevalence of English as a universal language of communication (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011). Consequently, the spread of English results in the suppression of an indigenous language, leading to its deterioration at both the social and educational level. While the situation in the Arab world isn't quite this apocalyptic, linguists and scholars are apprehensive because English is favoured over Arabic in different channels of communication; ranging from academic environments to advertisements (Mejdell, 2008).

While there are extolled positives to a bilingual education, that benefit is conditional upon the satisfaction of a certain dynamic. Nero (2005) stated that high literacy levels in the first language [L1] build the second language's [L2] cognitive academic language proficiency [CALP]. It can be concluded that the continuous development of L1 leads to an improved learning for L2 (Hornberger, 2003). Moreover, Cummins (2000) indicated that the continuous transfer of academic skills between L1 and L2 will only happen if students are evenly exposed to L1 and L2 in reading and writing. Thus, the transfer of the latter skills is facilitated when the common underlying proficiency [CUP] of L1 and L2 exists. In either instance, the development of the second language is dependent on the strong foundation of the first. In the case of the Arabic language, the literature not only suggests that there are challenges resulting from its inherent diglossia, but that the second language is increasingly replacing Arabic as the primary means of communication.

Background

Lebanon is a prime example of bilingual education whereby students acquire either

English or French as a compulsory second language at the early stage of learning. Fedda Darwiche & Oweini (2012) cite bilingual education as an additional complication for the acquisition of vocabulary words in diglossic Arabic. Their work highlights the deficiency attributed to reduced focus on the Arabic language in the Lebanese curriculum, which: 1) competes for time with the designated second language; 2) suffers from less attractive learning resources and tools than its Western equivalent and; 3) is given secondary billing by parents in the home environment in favor of the secondary language.

The primary purpose of this study is to establish a correlation between diglossia and the development of oral Arabic language in bilingual students attending the primary and elementary cycles of a private school in rural Lebanon. The research addresses the following stipulations: 1) Determine the trend of oral language development, with respect to both classical and colloquial Arabic, for bilingual Lebanese students at the early stages of learning; 2) determine the grade level of education at which point there is a convergence of acquisition between classical and colloquial Arabic; and 3) account for a comparable or contrasting degree of oral language acquisition between classical Arabic and a secondary language.

With the work of Fedda Darwiche & Oweini (2012) providing the only comparable study in existent literature, this research is important to collaborate – and indeed extend – the previous findings on diglossia with respect to bilingual students. An expansion on prior research serves the purpose of providing a springboard for the development of new strategies to aid Arabic teachers and highlighting the areas where policy reform should focus ensuing efforts.

Methodology:

Research design

The correlational research design was used for the purpose of finding the relationship between diglossia and oral language development. In applying the correlational research, the study determines the degree of association between: 1) Student scores on the Story Recall subtest in both formal and colloquial Arabic, and 2) Oral language scores in English and formal Arabic to identify the degree of preference between first and second languages.

Sampling procedure

A sample of 140 students from a private rural school in Aley, Mount Lebanon, were selected at random for participation in this study; with an equal number of respondents [n=20] selected within each class from kindergarten through grade 6.

To ensure that students with contrastive academic achievement were included within the study, the researchers applied a two-stage random sampling technique. All selected students with an average age of 8 years had been enrolled in this private school as of kindergarten, with Arabic being their primary language, followed by English as the secondary. The researcher, a member of the school's staff and thus familiar with the respondents, selected ten students at random from each grade level [kindergarten, I, II, III, IV, V, & VI], followed by another ten students at random resulting in a total of one hundred forty students selected as respondents. Upon entering each classroom, the students were cordially invited to participate in a project that would improve the school's teaching of the Arabic language, at which point the would-be respondents were able to opt into the project voluntarily. Reaction to the invitation was positive throughout the grade levels, allowing for the designated number of students from each class to be selected [n=20]. Students' names were clustered in groups of two as part of the first stage of random sampling. For the second stage of random sampling, one student from each cluster was selected at random, with the names of participants posted on a whiteboard with a schedule of assigned days for testing.

Since the subject matter for this study is highly sensitive, ethical considerations were strictly implemented. The researchers were completely transparent about the purpose of the research. All information was handled with the strictest confidentiality, and individual identification was known only to the researchers.

Instruments

The following two instruments -- both in the form of standardized tests -- were utilized in the collection of data:

Story recall subtest. Appropriated from the Woodcock Johnson-III Tests of Achievement [WJ III ACH], the Story Recall Subtest consists of ten stories arranged in increasing order of complexity. These measures are capable of identifying the oral language ability of participants, in addition to their language development. The Subtest is administered by the examiner who first reads out the stories, before then requiring the participants to demonstrate recall by way of recoding and the construction of mental representations (Woodcock et al., 2006).

The Subtest was modified by reciting stories in both formal and colloquial Arabic translations, with each two paired together in a grouping to serve as a starting point. Before testing, the correct starting items in the participant's score sheet were marked as per the specific table found in the WJ III battery. The starting item for a participant in grade four, for example, is story five. Elements of the story are separated by slashes [/] on the Test Record. For each element of the story correctly identified by the respondent, a check mark was placed for the segment. For words marked in bold letters, an exact recall of the element was necessary for a correct marking, while the remainder of the elements would be counted as correct if paraphrased accurately. Students were not penalized for errors resulting from articulation miscues, while synonyms of bold words were marked down as correct. In order to account for the school's Arabic teaching program, scoring guidelines were tailored with the assistance of the school's Arabic language coordinator. This was important due to schools varying in the instruction of Arabic at lower grade levels, as per previously cited literature regarding the introduction of vowel-based or non vowel-based Arabic (Oweini & Hazoury, 2010). In effect, this meant that the participants in this case were only penalized for errors resulting from incorrect diacritics if they belonged to the upper elementary grade levels [Grades 4, 5, 6]. The students were marked following their recollection of both stories within each grouping (formal and colloquial story pairing). In the instance where a student scored less than the designated number on the score sheet for the starting item, stories from the preceding group level were recited. In the event of a student scoring higher than the designated number, the Subtest moved on to the next degree of story complexity until the criteria for scoring was met or the tenth story was successfully recalled. The software scoring program of the Woodcock Johnson III Tests was then used to input the final score tally in order to get the standardized and age equivalent scores necessary to study the correlation of variables in the research.

Bilingual verbal ability tests. The BVAT [Picture Vocabulary test, Oral Vocabulary – Synonyms test, Oral Vocabulary – Antonyms Test, and Verbal Analogies Tests] comprise a series of examinations that measure the bilingual verbal proficiency and exclusive cognitive/academic language abilities that participants demonstrate between English and a second designated language (Muñoz-Sandoval, 1998). As the manual of BVAT states, each item in the non-English test is a translation of the equivalent item in the English test.

The Picture Vocabulary test consists of fifty-eight pictured objects used to measure the comprehension knowledge of the participant by way of identifying the objects according to order of familiarity (Muñoz-Sandoval, 1998). Students were presented with two different pictures at a time and asked to place their finger on the object recited by the administering researcher. A correct identification of the designated object was considered a correct response.

The Oral Vocabulary test assesses the comprehension knowledge of participants by evaluating the ability to provide synonyms and antonyms for administered words. Upon providing a demonstration of what is expected from the student, the participants were then asked to provide synonyms for twenty printed vocabulary words and antonyms for twenty four others. Responses were denoted scores of either 1 for correct responses, or 0 for false answers.

The Verbal Analogies test measures extends the evaluation of comprehension knowledge by also measuring reasoning and fluid intelligence (Muñoz-Sandoval, 1998). The test is carried out by evaluating the capacity of the student to reveal hidden relationships among words and retrieve a suitable response. The participant is first given a point of reference with the recital of a statement, such as 'a bird flies; a fish ...'. The student is instructed to complete the

analogy by providing the adequate verb. While the words themselves are simple throughout, the complexity of the relationship increases in tandem with students providing correct responses. The starting point in terms of relationship complexity is determined according to the suggested guidelines for the student's grade level. Again, participants are scored 1 for correct analogies, and 0 for false responses.

Testing conditions

Validity and interpretation of the results of the administered tests rely on the researcher's preparation and following the general procedures while implementing the tests that are found in the comprehensive manual of each test (Muñoz-Sandoval, 1998; Woodcock et al., 2006). Testing rooms were chosen to be accessible for all participants, with attention given to a quiet and comfortable setting, in addition to adequate lighting and air circulation. Notices were placed on doors in order to avoid interruptions and sufficient time was allocated in order to complete each test at a natural pace. This afforded students a reasonable time for responding to each item, and testing sessions were administered on different days to ensure that there was no conflict with exam periods or a build-up of pressure. Furthermore, the following modifications were made for two students with physical disabilities as permitted by the tests' respective manuals: 1) Participants could elect to type their responses, and 2) enlarged test pages were provided for students with visual impairments.

Limitations of the study:

Two related limitations exist for this study. First, the participants were selected from a single private school, a scenario that could have enabled selection bias. Second, the results of the presented research sample cannot be generalized to the entire population.

Results:

Bilingual verbal ability tests

Values are reported in the form of mean ± SD for quantitative variables. The analysis of variance technique [ANOVA] was utilized to determine the statistical significance of differences among means of standard scores for quantitative variables between all grade levels. The SPSS the Tukey post-hoc test was conducted in order to determine differentiation between grade levels, while the Paired-Samples T Test was applied to determine the statistical significance of differences between raw score means of two quantitative variables for students at the same grade level. Finally, the one-way MANOVA was applied in order to determine the statistical significance of differences existent within raw score means of two or more quantitative variables across all grade levels. If the p-value – i.e. the probability of an observed result arising by chance -- is less than 0.05, then the difference between means was statistically significant.

Story recall subtest

The results of the Story Recall Subtest WJ III were analyzed to statistically identify the level of significance between the following: 1) the mean standard scores of the Story Recall Subtest in classical Arabic among all grade levels; 2) the mean standard scores of the Story Recall subtest in colloquial Arabic among all grade levels; 3) the mean standard scores of the Story Recall subtest in classical and colloquial Arabic between the lower elementary classes [Kindergarten till grade 3] and upper elementary classes [grades 4 through 6) and; 4] the mean standard scores of Story Recall subtest in classical and colloquial Arabic within the same grade level. A breakdown of mean standard scores for this instrument is presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Mean raw scores* ± SD of BVAT (Oral Vocabulary test) by grade level

Insert Table 1 Here

In order to determine whether classical Arabic or English represents the more comfortable language for students, the results of the BVAT

were analyzed to statistically identify degrees of significance between the following: 1) the mean raw scores of BVAT in classical Arabic and English for the lower elementary classes and upper elementary classes (following on the same grade level groupings as the Story Recall Subtest); 2) the mean raw scores of BVAT in classical Arabic and English between the lower and upper elementary classes; and 3) the mean standard scores of Verbal Bilingual Ability and English Oral Proficiency to identify whether or not the classical Arabic scores have gained from the additional English scores. A breakdown for the mean standard scores, as per examination within the BVAT, is presented in Tables 2-6.

Table 2: Mean raw scores* ± SD of BVAT (Verbal Analogies test) by grade level

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Insert Table 2 Here

Table 3: Mean standard scores ± SD of BVAT (Picture Vocabulary) by grade level

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Insert Table 3 Here

Table 4: Mean standard scores* ± SD of BVAT (Bilingual Ability and English Proficency) by grade level

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Insert Table 4 Here

Table 5: Mean standard scores ± SD of Story Recall subtest WJ III grade level

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Table 6: Mean raw scores* ± SD of BVAT (Picture Vocabulary test) by grade level

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Discussion:

The findings of Story Recall subtest reveal that diglossia has an impact on the late development of oral language amongst participants. By comparing the mean standard scores of classical and colloquial Arabic, significance is established for both the lower and upper elementary school grades, with a higher significance for those attending lower grade levels. It transpires that colloquial Arabic is more easily acquired than classical Arabic but the difficulty of classic Arabic acquisition decreases when students progress through their schooling. These results support the findings of Saeigh-Haddad et al. (2011), whereby colloquial Arabic phonemes are more readily recognized than classical ones. Diglossia-related impairment of oral language fluency in Saeigh-Haddad (2003b) is equally confirmed. In reference to the colloquial Arabic scores of the Story Recall subtest, acquisition of informal language also improves as students move through grade levels, although the improvement is not as evident as the improvement in classical Arabic. This can be attributed to the fact that conditions for acquiring colloquial language skills are less changing due to informal speech not being as dependent on schooling as classical Arabic. This concurs with Fedda Darwiche & Oweini (2012) that classical Arabic would

ameliorate more significantly due to the school setting being the only environment where the high form of the language is practiced.

With respect to the BVAT findings, the raw scores of the English tests were significantly higher than those of the Arabic editions, indicating a clear preference of students towards English [L2] over their primary Arabic language [L1]. This finding indicates a necessary reform plan for the acquisition of the Arabic language in order to counteract the encroachment of the secondary language in Arab countries. Moreover, the scores of the bilingual verbal ability (Arabic and English combined) are the same as the English language proficiency scores. This is possibly related, as identified in Cummins (2000) and Nero (2005), to the low level of acquisition of the Arabic language. Studies have shown that the high literacy levels in L1 build L2's cognitive academic language proficiency [CALP]. It can be concluded that the continuous development of L1 leads to an improved learning for L2 (Hornberger, 2003). Moreover, Cummins (2000) indicated that the continuous transfer of academic skills between L1 and L2 will only happen if students are evenly exposed to L1 and L2 in reading and writing. The results of the BVAT indicate that this balance is not present in the sample group, and that English is effectively supplanting

Arabic as the primary L1; a language which already suffers from complications due to its diglossic nature.

Fedda Darwiche & Oweini (2012) have previously suggested a reform to the instruction of the Arabic language in order to maintain cultural identity and overcome the youth's 'mixed feelings about their own language' (358). This is accomplished by introducing students to enjoyable activities that improve oral language skills in tandem with written script in textbooks. By affording formal Arabic an oral, and thus social transmission, educators are thus less dependent on textbooks that are perceived as boring while strengthening the established connection between strong oral skills and future written proficiency. A related approach, and one that enhances picture vocabulary, involves having students either describe their own artwork in formal oral depictions, or having teachers organize games of discovery, whereby students need to extract clues from their classmates and detect the nature of mystery objects; all with the use of formal oral language skills.

Given that the development of oral skills goes hand in hand with the improvement of social skills, tactics such as the recreation of enjoyable real life situations and role playing activities enhance oral skills by way of social communication (Schrank & Woodcock, 2001). The enforcement of formal language in social settings can be further enhanced by promoting socially oriented approaches such as the STORE strategy [Setting, Trouble, Order of Events, Resolution, and End]; the use of image-schema-based instruction (Morimoto & Loewen, 2007); task-based-language-teaching with emphasis on form components (De La Fuente 2006) and; word manipulation (Fang & Xi-ya, 2009).

While the highest expectations are set upon teachers in the school setting, parents are equally encouraged to appropriate strategies to enhance their children's acquisition of Arabic in order to diminish the divide between the colloquial language used in the household and the more stately form of Arabic that is promoted in the classroom. Donitsa-Schmidt, Inbar, & Shohamy (2004) found that parental attitudes towards the Arabic language are a strong predictor of how their children approach Arabic within the classroom. Parents are encouraged to recite stories to their children in the primary Arabic language, or even watch cartoons in their native tongue, before engaging them with conversations about those very stories/TV programs in formal oral language. Such efforts to engage in formal language would not only help to avoid the caveats of an encroaching second languages, but face the difficulties of a diglossic Arabic language distressed by its own internal challenges.

Conclusion:

The findings of the study yield three hypotheses: 1) That diglossia has a negative impact on oral language development for bilingual Lebanese students; 2) That the negative effect of diglossia regresses over time due to increased exposure; and 3) That there is a convergence of acquired classical and colloquial Arabic skills as of the fourth grade of schooling.

The challenges that arise from Arabic's diglossic nature are well investigated in presented literature, whereas the compounding aggravation of a more attractive second English language has yet to be adequately evaluated. While the results of the Story Recall subtest demonstrate the relative difficulty of acquiring classical formal language in comparison to the colloquial low form, the BVAT reveals that the inherent difficulties of Arabic diglossia are further threatened by the more comfortable acquisition of English amongst students. Furthermore, the acquisition of the English language does not result in better bilingual ability for students; with the significant differences in acquisition leading to a deterioration of the Arabic mother tongue. This study therefore recommends a vital extension of the body of literature regarding bilingualism in Arab-speaking countries in order to develop urgent policy reforms for education in the region.

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