

READING LITERACY IN ARABIC

What challenges 1st grade teachers face

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Abstract

The reading level of Arab students in Israel is a source of concern for educators and scholars. Arabic is a diglossic language: there are significant linguistic differences between colloquial and standard Arabic. Research reports that diglossia affects students' reading literacy in Arabic. The aim of the present study was to examine how teachers conceptualize the difficulties they encounter while teaching reading, and their perceptions of the factors causing reading difficulties in Arabic. Interviews were carried out with 20 1st grade teachers engaged in the teaching of reading. Content analysis of the data showed that teachers described differently difficulties which are related to the characteristics of Arabic and those related to personal or contextual factors. They ascribed a great importance to letter-sound recognition in the preparation of the young students in kindergartens and stressed the significance of an ongoing practice at home as a channel to master reading literacy in Arabic.

Keywords: reading literacy, teaching reading, Arabic, 1st grade, diglossia, family literacy

The reading level of Arabic-speaking students in Israel is a source of concern for many educators and scholars. Data from international tests administered at the turn of the century revealed significant rates of failure in reading tests among Arabic-speaking children as compared to Hebrew-speaking children (Ben-Simon & Hamza, 1996a, 1996b; Kennet-Cohen, Cohen, & Oren, 2005; Mullis et al., 2003; 2007; Zuzovsky, 2010). This article presents a study which examined the point of view of 1st grade Arab teachers in Israel who teach the first steps in reading Arabic: how they describe the difficulties of teaching reading, and how they conceptualize struggling students. Our understanding of the teachers' point of view may be an important component in a systemic treatment designed to cultivate reading literacy in Arabic.¹

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading in Arabic. Arabic is the mother tongue and primary national language of the Arab citizens of Israel. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is taught as a first language in all Arab schools in Israel. Scholars have identified three main features of the difficulty with learning to read in Arabic: (1) the diglossic nature of the language; (2) the perceptual burden of Arabic orthography; (3) the complex relationship between graphemes and phonemes (Ayari, 1996; Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2000; Saiegh-Haddad, 2003; 2004; 2007).

Diglossia. Arabic is diglossic. This is a stable linguistic state where two forms of a language are used simultaneously within the same speech community, each fulfilling a different social function. Arabic has a spoken vernacular that is completely different from Standard Arabic, which is usually more complex in terms of grammar and serves mainly for literary writing, textbooks and printed media (Ferguson, 1959).

The local spoken Arabic vernacular is acquired as a mother tongue, and used almost exclusively throughout adult daily life. In contrast, the standard written language is studied formally within the education system. According to Maamouri (1998), MSA is, in fact, no one's mother tongue.

Comparison between MSA and other existing language varieties reveals substantial phonological, morpho-syntactical and lexical variations (Ibrahim, 2010; Saiegh-Haddad, 2003; Maamouri, 1998; Zughoul, 1980). The significance of such variations is that exposure to MSA resembles second language acquisition (Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2000; Ibrahim & Aharon-Peretz, 2005; Saiegh-Haddad, 2004). Due to the diglossic nature of the language, many Arabic-speaking children get to 1st grade with their families and community's vocabulary, which is considerably different from the MSA vocabulary necessary in formal-academic contexts. This variance has been found to hinder children's progress towards fluent reading.

Arabic orthography. Arabic orthography contains 29 letters, and a set of diacritics which indicate the vowels. There are three long vowels and three short vowels,

¹ We are grateful to our student Moshira Manna, whose study is the starting point of the present article.

written either above or below the letter. Additional diacritics also include a quiescence (*sukūn*), a double letter stress (*shaddah*) and the *tanwin*—a diacritic found only in Standard Arabic at the end of a word, indicating the syntactical function of the word in the sentence.

Vowelized Arabic script provides full information about the phonemes, and is defined as a flat orthography. However, Arabic script without vowel signs is considered a deep orthography, since it lacks a great deal of information about the vowels, and is thus considered one of the sources of learners' reading problems (Abu-Rabia, 1997; Abu-Rabia & Siegel, 2003; Ibrahim, Eviatar & Ahron-Peretz, 2002).

Some of the letters in Arabic are homophonic—i.e. have similar sounds. Moreover, it is often hard to distinguish within words between long and short vowels through hearing alone. Hence there are words which are pronounced the same but written differently. This lack of consistency in letter-sound correspondence hinders access to the phonemes (Share, 2008).

The grapheme-phoneme mapping where the letter is expressed in different ways presents a challenge to Arabic readers (Ziegler & Goswami, 2005). Twenty-two letters in Arabic, out of the 29, have a different form according to whether they are in initial, middle, or final position within the word.

A further difficulty in reading in Arabic derives from a visual similarity among certain letters which are distinguished only by the dots appearing above or below the basic letter form. This visual similarity may require a high level of cognitive attention to the reading process (Abu-Rabia, 2001; Ibrahim, 2006).

Furthermore, reading a fully vowelized text might be visually and cognitively burdensome, due to all the markings above and below the letters, when even a small error in reading might lead to erroneous decoding (Abu-Rabia, 1998).

The above brief review clearly demonstrates the challenges in the acquisition of reading in Arabic.

Teachers' knowledge about language and its instruction. The gap between the school language and students' languages is well known in other communities in the world. Researchers call for acknowledgement of the multi-lingual reality in young children's classrooms. They emphasize the importance of teachers' knowledge about these languages, their perception of them and their ability to use this knowledge to facilitate students' integration into the formal school language (Adair, Colegrove & McManus, 2017; Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Schleppegrell, 2004).

Other studies report that many teachers lack knowledge in language structure, morphology and phonology, and do not possess a deep comprehension of phonological awareness or the research-based methods of fostering it in order to assist novice readers (Alatalo, 2016; Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich et al., 2004; Hammond, 2015; Spear-Swerling & Zibulsky, 2014).

Awareness of MSA in Israel usually begins in kindergarten, where teachers read stories to young children, initiate words-plays or display presentation-boards containing written words on the walls (Shahin & Blum-Kulka, 2015). In recent years special literacy interventions have been employed in kindergartens, but their impact and

contribution are affected by the teachers' knowledge of MSA and its phonological, morphological and lexical differences from spoken Arabic, as well as their ability to identify and understand difficulties young learners may face (Levin, Saiegh-Haddad, Hende, & Ziv, 2008).

In the current study, we wanted to learn about 1st grade teachers' perceptions concerning Arabic reading learning and instruction in their classrooms and particularly difficulties they face, through their stories. We asked the following questions: how do they describe the difficulties of teaching reading, and what do they tell about their students who face difficulties in mastering reading in Arabic?

2. THE STUDY

The present article offers a deeper look at some findings of a wider study (Poyas, Bawardi & Manaa, 2018) employing a qualitative research paradigm, and specifically a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1994).

2.1 *Participants and context*

The participants were 20 1st grade teachers of Arabic from four state schools from northern Israel, chosen due to their proximity and availability. We focused on well-established schools with strong traditions, where the teaching of reading is carried out systematically, according to the Ministry of Education curriculum.

All participating teachers were Arabic native speakers and spoke the vernacular used in Arab villages in northern Israel. They had an undergraduate degree and a Teaching Certificate. Fifteen had graduated from an Arab teacher education college, and the other five from Hebrew teacher education colleges, which do not offer courses in the fostering of Arabic reading literacy. Some of the participants studied Arabic Language, while the others studied other subject matter areas, such as Hebrew or Science. They had all taken a yearly course regarding reading and writing processes as part of their elementary school teacher education programs. Their ages range from 31-59, with an average of 38.4. Their teaching experience ranges from 6-36 years, with an average of 15.5. Teachers of pre-school and 1st grade are encouraged by the Ministry of Education (2009) to prepare their students for communication in MSA, to facilitate their integration into school culture. Teachers use spoken and MSA during school time interchangeably.

The interviewer was an Arab 1st grade teacher as well, and the interviews were conducted in Arabic.

2.2 *Data collection*

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews. The interview included ten open guiding questions about how they taught reading, the students' difficulties and how the teachers coped with them (see Appendix).

The questions helped the participants reveal the narratives of their teaching, their actions, their experiences, their difficulties and how they cope with working with 1st grade students.

2.3 Procedure

The interviews were conducted in Arabic at a place chosen by the participants, between August 18th and September 9th, 2015. Each interview lasted about 90 minutes. It was recorded and transcribed by the researcher shortly after completion. The translation of the teachers' spoken Arabic into English was not an easy task, and it is possible that some of the linguistic nuances were lost in translation.

2.4 Data analysis

The interviews underwent several stages of content analysis (Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1994). First, the guiding questions were used—the responses were grouped into umbrella categories according to the main questions, and given initial titles. We then returned to four participants to expand their stories and ask for clarifications.

Later, similarities and differences among the umbrella categories deriving from the questions were examined, and alternative conceptual categories were considered. As a result, the number of umbrella categories was reduced, and each new category was given a more precise title.

In stage 3, content analysis was performed on each category separately, where the unit of analysis was a whole idea expressing a problem or an action. This idea was sometimes expressed across several sentences and examples, and sometimes by a single phrase. The ideas were grouped into sub-categories which were given titles.

To strengthen the study's trustworthiness, the classification into categories was reviewed by an additional expert in language teaching and learning, and a process of full analysis was carried out on five randomly selected interviews. Modifications were made to reach an agreement on categories and sub-categories, ensuring that each idea appeared in the most appropriate category.

In the final stage, all the interviews were reread and analyzed to thicken each category and sub-category and ensure the classification of as many ideas as possible into the sub-categories. Following this, based on the analysis and emerging from the findings, it became possible to gain insights from the research context.

Below are three main categories deriving from the participants' stories:

- 1) The difficulties and their causes as perceived by the teachers (questions 1,2,4,6,8,10)
- 2) The teachers' perceptions of the role of the family and the kindergarten in supporting literacy (questions 1,3,5,6,7,9,10)
- 3) The teachers' perceptions concerning their role and responsibilities (questions 1,2,3,5,6,7,9,10)

Following these steps of analysis, we conducted a further deeper analysis on the first two categories from which we may learn how 1st grade teachers conceptualize challenges they face while teaching reading in Arabic. We examined the form and structure of their stories, types of obstacles students face according these stories, and types of support the teachers mentioned.

The research procedure upheld the ethical principles required of qualitative research: the participants agreed in writing to participate in the study, the researcher explained the aims of the study to them, the interviews were conducted with respectful attentiveness and in a non-judgmental manner (Josselson, 2013), and all identifying data were omitted (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

3. FINDINGS

3.1 *The difficulties and their causes as perceived by the teachers*

The teachers describe the students' difficulties in reading acquisition as stemming from a physical problem, such as a hearing or sight disability, a learning disability, extreme shyness, emotional problems or attention deficit problems. Others find it difficult to learn to read Arabic due to the language characteristics; and yet others reach 1st grade unprepared due to insufficient preparation at home or in kindergarten. The teachers' stories describe many students whose difficulties stem from several causes. Here we discuss the first two groups.

Fourteen (70%) teachers mentioned hearing problems. As Arabic has different letters representing similar sounds, these problems carry much weight. Students with a hearing disability or simply an insensitive ear cannot differentiate between the different sounds of the words used in the lesson, and makes mistakes when reading or writing them. Twelve participants related to difficulties stemming from sight disabilities. The high percentage of reference to this issue may attest to a high percentage of cases in which diagnosis of sight problems is done only when the children get to school. Attention deficit problems which do not allow the students to concentrate on their studies received similar mention, as well as emotional issues stemming from the situation at home, either rejection and negligence or being over-spoiled: 'Most students having difficulties do not have order at home. A short concentration span, a high level of distractibility. Excessive movement. Spatial problems, cannot write on the line. Behavioral problems' (Participant 7). Six teachers also mentioned speech problems which make it difficult for the students to pronounce some of the letter sounds correctly, and 'that's why they read incorrectly' (Participant 3).

The teachers claim that these students develop behaviors which add to their difficulties: 'The students with difficulties [...] feel frustrated, sometimes introverted, and sometimes disturb the class' (Participant 19); 'They have low self-esteem, they feel they are not as good as the other students, they feel frustrated, sometimes they refuse to read' (Participant 18); 'They often cry, they refuse to come to school, they are pressured, suffer from stomach aches, headaches' (Participant 13). The teachers

describe the behavior of students with difficulties as frustration, introversion and/or disturbances.

Unlike these problems, others are more slowly diagnosed, depending on the pace of teaching reading in class. Participant 12 said: 'I discover the difficulties when I teach the material and ask the students to read. I discover the student with difficulties when he's reading'. Six more teachers also mentioned that identification of many difficulties usually occurs when the students are required to read aloud in class or in a small group. The vocal reading uncovers difficulties stemming from the characteristics of Arabic.

When Participant 11 was asked what difficulties she encounters when teaching, she began with those stemming from Arabic orthography:

Students mix up letter sounds and names [...] they mix up the sounds similar to the sound of the letter. The letters that are similar in shape. Reading the syllables: reading letters with the long vowels or with the short vowels, students mix them up when reading. Students mix up words with *Al al ta'rif* [article] [...]. Wrong pronunciation, students read many words as if they are pronounced in Spoken Arabic instead of reading them in Literary Arabic.

This was repeated in all the interviews: difficulty in differentiating among similar sounds and their attributions to the letters, difficulty in differentiating among similarly shaped letters, difficulty in differentiating between long and short vowels and expressing this differentiation while reading, difficulty in reading aloud words preceded by an article, difficulty in identifying and reading the *tanwin*, and a tendency to read the words in their spoken rather than the standard pronunciation. Participants 3 and 4 mentioned that these difficulties appear at the beginning of every school year.

We have found that the participants did not consciously differentiate between difficulties stemming from health issues, lack of emotional readiness for school or faulty preparation, and difficulties stemming from the characteristics of the language being learned. However, while they all mentioned in a very similar manner, making a sort of list, the difficulties appearing every year when teaching the sounds, letters and vowels and the way they should be read in the context of the sentence, half of the participants also described difficulties related to the children's life context as stories, beginning with the words: 'I had a child...'; 'Last year I had a pupil...'; 'For example I had a pupil with lung problems, she couldn't read fluently because she needed air in order to do so' (Participant 6); 'This year I encountered a new problem, a student who can't write and can't control writing on the line, too slow in his writing, doesn't participate in the lessons but reads fluently' (Participant 4); 'I had a student who walked around the class all the time, didn't recognize the letters, was drawing all the time, refused to read and write the necessary skills' (Participant 11); 'There is a student in my class whose parents are getting a divorce and he is staying with his grandmother. All day I feel that he's looking at me but thinking about his mother, so in the end he doesn't understand and doesn't internalize the material' (Participant 16). This type of description raises the possibility that the teachers are familiar with

the characteristics of Arabic. They can summarize them in a tidy list expected to appear every year. However, health-related, emotional and behavioral difficulties are something else, they are surprising, they are life stories based in an environmental-family related context, and worry the teachers.

This assumption is strengthened by the fact that the number of statements relating to the characteristics of Arabic as causes of difficulty in reading acquisition was much smaller (39) than those relating to family-related, health-related, emotional or school-related causes of difficulty (118).

Seven teachers, 35% of those interviewed, explicitly mentioned that there are difficulties due to the considerable difference between the spoken and the standard language.

At home, the students use spoken language and at school they learn the language of books—Standard Arabic—which is far from the spoken language, and this makes it hard for them to acquire reading. They omit letters when reading like in the spoken language (Participant 4).

The Arabic language is actually two languages, there is the spoken everyday language and there is the literary language taught in schools. [...] the grammar of Arabic is different from that of other languages, it's more complicated (Participant 1).

The fact that only one third of the teachers mentioned diglossia as a reason for reading difficulties is puzzling, given the many studies that have mentioned the reading difficulties diglossia causes. None of the teachers used the term 'diglossia'. They preferred using the Arabic terms for Spoken and Standard Arabic.

It is also interesting to note that the teachers did not list the fact that their students reach 1st grade with a modest or insufficient vocabulary in Standard Arabic, which may hinder the reading acquisition process, as a specific difficulty. This was only exposed indirectly from their discussion of the role of the home and the kindergarten, and attributed to insufficient preparation for 1st grade, and is discussed below.

3.2 The teachers' perceptions of the family's and the kindergarten's roles in preparing the children for school

All the teachers related to the significance of the family in reading acquisition and overcoming difficulties during the process:

The student must practice at home, the home is a continuity of what they learn in school. [...] Students whose parents do not read to them and who do not practice reading, find it difficult to read a new, unfamiliar word in school. When the parents make sure to read stories, play with their child and speak Literary Arabic, when reading is encouraged at home, when they make sure the student identifies and practices the letters before getting to school, this assists him in reading acquisition. We cannot rely today on the teacher at school only, reading acquisition needs both sides, continuity at home with the parents solves 50% of the students' problems (Participant 8).

Participant 7 expressed this more bluntly: 'a student with difficulty is a student who has problems such as a weak vocabulary, as he lives with environmental deprivation, parents who do not support or encourage him'.

Side by side with general agreement that cooperation with the parents is necessary, most participants discussed the difficulty of achieving such cooperation:

Some parents don't have the time to sit with their son and practice with him, or provide a learning atmosphere at home. Some parents do not have the awareness to teach their son at home, or they teach their sons inappropriately, thus the students are confused between the learning in school and at home (Participant 2).

Eight of the participants mentioned the phenomenon in which parents teach their children in a confusing or even wrong way, thus making things even harder for them. In contrast, Participant 12's words stood out in their uniqueness, presenting a different angle on the parents-teacher relationship.

Sometimes the parents help me notice a particular problem, call me and ask me to pay attention to the child, as he has a specific problem. They help me identify the problem and deal with it.

At the same time as expecting assistance and preparation at home, the teachers also related to the kindergarten teacher's role. All participants mentioned the importance of kindergarten preparation, but approximately half discussed inadequate preparation for 1st grade, or preparation that does not generate a proper developmental continuum. Participant 3 complained that in kindergarten the children are not taught to recognize the sounds of the letters, they are only taught to name them: 'The kindergarten teachers carefully teach the children the names of the letters, but not the sounds the letters represent. The name of the letter does not help a student acquire reading' (Participant 3). Participant 4 also makes this distinction: 'We need the sounds of the letters in order to start reading acquisition, not the names of the letters'. These statements are interesting, considering the studies that report naming and retrieval to be important (Bishop, 2003; Caravolas, Hulme and Snowling, 2001).

Twelve participants mentioned the need to enrich the students by listening to stories in MSA, both in kindergarten and at home. Participant 12 says that 'There is a lack of story reading specifically in the Arab sector, and the Ministry of Education needs to pay attention to this issue'. That is, she points at a cultural phenomenon of too little reading in Arab society, and calls for top-down interference.

Participant 5 says that 'Kindergarten teachers do not make sure to follow essential reading issues, they need to teach the students to love listening to stories. The Ministry of Education should add time for reading stories to the students'.

As a result, say the teachers, some of the 1st grade students get to school unprepared, and they need to reacquaint them with the letters and their sounds to create a common ground, before they can start following the course book their school uses. The feeling that reading in Arabic is unique is clearly expressed in Participant 20's words: 'The teacher needs tools to handle the difficulties of the Arabic language which are many; the Ministry of Education needs to take care of the Arabic teacher'.

Participant 17 adds that there need to be 'academic courses in Arabic language, the Ministry of Education should encourage the learning of Arabic through Arabic academic courses', i.e., make sure to create a closer acquaintance with MSA language in teacher education programs.

4. DISCUSSION

This study examined how 1st grade teachers of Arabic describe the difficulties of teaching reading, and their perceptions and knowledge of the factors causing those difficulties.

The discussion will relate to the teachers' professional perceptions regarding the struggling students and the causes of their difficulties, the teachers' attitudes to the teaching of MSA, and student preparation for 1st grade.

4.1 The teachers' professional perceptions regarding students with difficulties and the causes of those difficulties

The findings of the present study demonstrate that the teachers attribute the students' difficulties to three interrelated factors: (a) health-related-emotional-behavioral problems unconnected to the curriculum and the material studied; (b) insufficient preparation which causes a lack of vocabulary and listening habits, as well as partial recognition of the letters and their sounds; and (c) the complexity of the Arabic language and its orthography.

Students suffering from the first two causes experience greater difficulty when learning to read in Arabic. The importance of the student's vocabulary, preparation for school and the affinity between the home language and the school language are reported in many studies (Boyle, Al-Ajjawi & Xiang 2014; Schleppegrell 2004); thus, it is not surprising that the teachers claim that faulty preparation causes difficulties in reading acquisition. However, their words emphasize the extent of the problem when there is a big gap between the language of the home and the community and that of the school, regarding vocabulary, pronunciation, wealth of sounds, consonants and vowels; so much so that some researchers claim that they are two distinct languages. The teachers' stories reveal a list of recurring difficulties which they expect and prepare for every year. They also discuss with comprehensive repetition what they think is the role of kindergarten teachers: teaching the letters and their sounds.

4.2 The teachers' attitudes to the teaching of Standard Arabic

The findings demonstrate that the teachers paid much more attention to health-related-educational-environmental problems than to problems caused by the characteristics of Arabic, and tended to describe them in a more detailed story-like manner.

This finding surprised us in light of the research findings attributing great significance to linguistic characteristics (Ziegler & Goswami, 2005).

A possible explanation of this finding lies in the fact that linguistic features are not changeable. From the teachers' point of view, what can be changed to make teaching easier are the teaching conditions and learning context. Hence, it seems, they spoke much more about these things. Their narratives show their beliefs that despite the complexity of the language, if students were given the support and encouragement they needed from the parents and the school, they would be able to overcome the objective linguistic difficulties.

As noted earlier, only seven of the teachers mentioned the diglossic nature of Arabic as a factor hindering the teaching of reading, although researchers perceive the teaching of MSA as second language acquisition because it is so different from the spoken vernacular (Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2000; Ibrahim & Aharon-Peretz, 2005). The interviewed teachers cope daily with the variance between the languages, but their stories do not seem to indicate that they perceive teaching MSA as teaching a second language, and the theoretical framework in which they function does not provide them with conceptual tools with which to attribute their difficulties and those of their students to the fact that MSA is a second language for the students. Even those who did mention in their own words the diglossic nature of the language, did not relate to the teaching of the reading of Arabic as teaching reading in a second language. As far as they were concerned, this was the children's language and their own, and they were teaching first language reading.

The issue of the status of MSA is not merely linguistic, but rather an ideological issue for Arabic speakers, as it is the language of culture, nation, religion, literature and poetry (Amara, 2013). Willingness to see it as a second language to be taught is related to both linguistic knowledge and a political-ideological stance, which is beyond the scope of the present article. It is safe to assume that the teachers' ideological stance also affects their attitude towards the language and the way it should be taught, an issue worthy of a separate study.

Amara (2013) points at problems in the teaching of MSA in Arab teacher education colleges, both from the cultural-national and from the linguistic point of view. The teachers' words support Amara's conclusions regarding the need to dedicate a substantial amount of time in the colleges to becoming familiar with MSA and all its components, as well as the elementary school pre-service teachers' linguistic proficiency.

4.3 Students' preparation for 1st grade

The teachers' perceptions, as revealed in this study, concur with the findings of studies showing that the introduction to reading in kindergarten and 1st grade must be considered as one continuum, and that it is very important that the teaching methods follow the same principles in order to prevent gaps that might later hamper reading acquisition in the higher classes (Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2000; Ibrahim & Aharon-

Peretz, 2005). Furthermore, the teachers' narratives indicate that Israel's current program for transition into 1st grade, which was designed to be gradual and developmentally adapted to the school, is not being properly implemented. Their experiences show that there is no monitoring of the program and there are not enough productive meetings between kindergarten and elementary school teachers.

The findings demonstrate a repeated issue raised by teachers regarding the significance of sound recall over naming letters. A possible explanation for this may be found in the language characteristics and orthography: multiplicity of similar sounds, similarity among letters and similarity of sound among different words necessitate a fine sound differentiation among pronunciation of similar sounds graphically represented by similar shapes, as well as sound differentiation between long and short vowels. In addition, MSA includes sounds which are not used in the spoken language, thus less familiar to young children. This necessitates deliberate sound recall, which teachers prefer to letter naming. They emphasize the need to teach the affinity between the letter and the sound it represents. This is not disconnected from research findings which demonstrate that connecting a sound to the graphic symbol and sound recall have a positive influence on faster acquisition of letter names later on, but not vice versa (Levin, Shatil-Carmon, & Asif-Rave, 2006).

The teachers' emphasis of the significance of home environment literacy is aligned with many studies that support the positive influence of literacy activity with the parents on reading acquisition (Sénéchal, 2006; Zygouris-Coe, 2007). However, it is reasonable to assume that the diglossia phenomenon makes things difficult not only for the teachers but also for the parents, who live in an environment of spoken Arabic and are less conversant in MSA. The present study shows that it is important not to settle for linguistic education in kindergartens only, but to also devote resources to the planning of a family literacy program, with the purpose of enriching the experience of parents and young children with MSA.

The current study analyzed the narratives of only 20 teachers, all from northern Israel. We feel further research should be undertaken, using additional tools, regarding the language knowledge of 1st grade teachers and their perception of its cultural significance. It is also important to compare the teachers' stories to their actual teaching. It is certainly necessary to enlarge the scope of the study to additional schools.

Despite the study's limitations, it teaches us much regarding 1st grade teachers' conceptualizations of the difficulties inherent in Arabic reading acquisition, and their expectations for support and an efficient preparation system for their students.

To sum up, the findings of the present study suggest several recommendations which may make dealing with these challenges easier: Fostering knowledge of MSA and its components, as well as its cultural status and importance at the teacher education stage; and at the same time fostering of approaches connecting the students' everyday language and the studied standard language. Developing a joint built-in support system for both 1st grade teachers and kindergarten teachers.

Development and implementation of family literacy programs in Arabic for parents of kindergarten and 1st grade students.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Tell me how you teach reading in your class. What stages and activities do you use?
- 2) Tell me about instances where you encountered a difficulty while teaching.
- 3) How do you cope with these difficulties?
- 4) Tell me what factors make it hard for your pupils to learn to read.
- 5) Tell me what factors make it easier for your pupils to learn to read.
- 6) Tell me how your pupils acquire reading. What do they manage to do and when?
- 7) How do you deal with a pupil who is struggling?
- 8) Explain to me what you mean by “pupils have difficulty learning to read”.
- 9) What are your needs when teaching?
- 10) Is there anything else you would like to bring up on this topic that we have not mentioned so far?