Examining the Role of Literacy Practices by Arab Families in Teaching their Children English before School in the USA

Introduction

It is very important for Arab families in the USA to engage their children at early ages in learning as well as practicing the English language to be able to survive later in their schools and in their lives in general. From my experience as an Arabic native speaker, sometimes, it is the case for some Arab families that they provide their children with the knowledge of the English language to avoid being isolated in this new language community at the beginning of their lives.

Young (2004) mentioned the importance of learning the language of the community in order to be part of this language community and not to feel excluded from it. Therefore, I want to focus on the literacy practices used by Arab families to aid their children in coping with the English language before they join school and how the existence or nonexistence of these practices helped their children or did not help them to do well in their schools in all language aspects.

Parents’ background in English is one of the factors that determines the effect of parents’ language practices with their children. As stated by Weigel et al. (2005), parents’ literacy level has its effect on children’s literacy performance. For example, it is the case with some Arab parents that their English background is adequate to be able to teach their children before school. In some other cases, parents’ language skills are not adequate enough to help their children with English literacy issues before they join schools. Therefore, conducting a research with some of
the Arabs will help to know how their language backgrounds affect their children learning of the English language.

Moreover, the bilingual environment that these children are raised in is another factor in literacy education of them. In bilingual situations, as mentioned by Reyes (2006), literacy learning although it is considered a “natural” issue, it is not an easy act when it is in a bilingual setting where it needs a lot of effort from children’s parents to do well in both languages to be able to learn reading and writing successfully. Therefore, it is difficult to be able to balance between the two languages especially because any native speakers of a language are keen, on the one hand, to let their children learn their mother tongue and, on the other hand, are also keen to help their children in learning the language of the community to survive peacefully in it.

In this study, I want to examine the role of literacy practices provided by Arab families to their children before joining preschool or elementary school. These practices might be a good assistance to them to feel that they are members of this community and to know that they have the potential in participating in it by knowing its language even if it is different from the parents’ language. I want also to learn more about the challenges these parents might face especially because the English is not their mother tongue and their efforts in dealing with these challenges. I will do that through exploring my own techniques, as an Arab, which I use with my daughters as well as exploring other families’ techniques with their children in Urbana-Champaign.

**Research Questions**

The following are the research questions that I want to examine in this study:

- How do Arab families in the USA prepare their children for school?

- What are the techniques adopted by Arab families in teaching their children literacy before joining school?
Literature Review

Although there is a lack of previous research on Arabs in this area of research, I will present different views about examining the role of preschool literacy practices by parents in teaching their children the language before they join school. For example, Heath (1983) presented the importance of knowing the home learning environment as well as the community of children before they join school. She stressed that examining these home environments will provide a description about the ways children are taught the language from their parents or even the community they live in.

There are some other studies that examined some of these techniques on literacy development by English native speakers or speakers of other languages. There have been some studies that focused on literacy practices by parents with their children before they join school. For example, Weigel et al. (2006) examined mothers’ thoughts and reactions to the practices they use with their children before school. The previous research presented in this study demonstrated the positive effect of parent’s literacy practices by parents at homes with their children, and the negative effect of not doing any literacy activities with their children. This qualitative study showed that mothers who use literacy activities with their children believe that these tasks will help them in participating better in their schools. However, mothers who do not believe in these kinds of activities with their children believe that children are still young to be taught reading and writing before school. Although, this study presented the awareness and techniques adopted by parents with their children, it was concerned with English native speakers environment. Accordingly, interviewing Arab mothers will help to know their beliefs and their hopes for their children if they help them in literacy activities at home.
Reese et al. (2008) in another study investigated the literacy affairs in Spanish speaking children who live in communities that vary in language whether in Spanish or English or any other literacy activities the children were exposed to. In most of the cases, the communities’ languages were Spanish and English together. Mainly, the literacy practices used in these communities were school-related tasks. The results showed the increase of literacy levels by children exposed to educational facilities, such as, access to libraries or available books at home in English. This study focused only on Spanish speaking children who tended to learn English in the USA.

Moreover, Reyes (2006) focused on the methods adopted in teaching bilingual children (Mexican-American) literacy in the two languages they speak at home or at school. The study was concerned with English and Spanish, where Spanish is their parents’ language and English is the community’s language. Although, these studies proved the positive effect of literacy activities practiced by parents with their children, none of them deal directly with Arabic native speakers to examine their beliefs, their practices and their techniques in teaching their children the English language. Therefore, in this study I want to explore Arabs conceptions about this issue depending on two factors. First, different Arab people might have different concepts about teaching their children literacy before entering school especially in English. Second, the difference between the two languages might impose some challenges on the learners. Reyes (2006) stressed that children should concentrate when learning languages with similar writing systems. However, they need more concentration when learning two different languages in the writing systems and she mentioned English and Bengali as an example. Therefore, it is the case with the Arabic language as it is different in its characteristics from English where the learner has to pay attention from early childhood for these differences to be able to learn both languages.
Methodology

In this research, I will go over the literacy practices that I personally do with my daughter who is in the second year of preschool. I will examine the different techniques and methods that I use to teach her English through using my own narratives in doing so. I want to explore how the writing practices, in particular, helped her in coping with the amount that her preschool offer to the children. I will also interview some Arab families to know their literacy techniques with their children. In fact, it will be difficult to do the research ethnographically, as it will be difficult in our culture to stay for longer periods with participants at their homes and observe their procedures with their children. Therefore, I will depend on interviews as the main source of the data alongside my own thoughts as an Arab person teaching my children literacy issues. I will interview a number of Arabic mothers to know the procedures that they do with their children before school.

In collecting data, I will try to interview working and nonworking mothers to know: first, how they think of this task whether they have the time or not to do these practices with their children. Second, how their knowledge of the English language can make difference with their children. Third, how their own beliefs about teaching their children literacy before joining school can take place. Through this I will be able to know the variations between them if exist.

I will first define the terms “literacy practices” and “literacy narratives.” According to Young (2004); Street defined “literacy practices” as the use of reading and writing to express behavioral, social or cultural ideals. Moreover, according to Young (2004), Eldred and Mortensen defined “literacy narratives” as the stories that reflect one’s own aspects of acquiring a language or learning literacy affairs. In his attempt to discuss the effect of his own narratives in thinking about literacy issues, Young (2004) presented his experience through some points; for
example, the speech pathologist as his initial step to know how to pronounce some letters correctly. Therefore, it is important to know how to apply the English language sound system as an attempt to use the language as native speakers. Second, he talked about how his parents’ generation had been discriminated because of their race despite being American citizens.

In another attempt to use personal narratives as a connection between race and literacy, Young (2007) depended on his own narratives through his life as an African American to illustrate the aspects that affected his literacy performance in the American community. Therefore, in this study I will go over the procedures we practice as Arabs to help our children feel that through their learning of the English language they will be part of this community. This will be through my own experience with my daughters as well as other Arabs’ experience with their children.

**Procedures**

The data will be collected from two sources: first, through my own thoughts as a mother and as a language teacher about the importance of fully knowing the language of the society that my daughters will be raised in to perform naturally in it. This is especially because the language of the society that they will live in for some years is different from our own language, or the language spoken at home. Second, I will collect the data through personal interviews with the research subjects. I am planning to interview from 8 to 12 subjects. I will contact the participants through the phone to describe the study, the purpose of it, and the consent forms with the participants and to decide the setting of the interview.

I will interview them to know their own perceptions in teaching their children English before joining school. I will ask them about their own experience with their children in teaching them the English language and the methods, techniques, and activities they use. The information
obtained from these interviews will function as the parents’ own narratives in knowing their practices that help their children getting engaged in the English language. The participants will be narrating their literacy practices with their own children in the English language and their own perceptions about these practices with them.

The participants will be provided with a consent form that describes the whole study. The interviews will be audio recorded and the tapes alongside the participants’ information will be kept confidential. The data obtained from the interviews will be analyzed for the research purpose. There are no serious risks associated with this study; however, in the family interviews, some parents might feel that they are not helping their children before school if they do not practice with them any literacy issues. The consent forms as well as the interview questions will be written in both languages, Arabic and English to facilitate the process for understanding the purpose and the procedures of the study.

I believe that the benefits of this study will be for both Arab parents and their children. Through the effect of these practices, parents will decide on how and why to teach their children English before joining school. Moreover, it will reconstruct the use of literacy issues with their children. Finally, through these practices, children will be able to perform well in school and to feel that this language will help them in communicating in the society in general. Overall, the study will inform us of the Arabs’ beliefs about teaching their children English before school.

**Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about your education in general and your language education in particular?
2. Do you remember any of the literacy practices used by your parents in teaching you Arabic or even English?
3. Do you teach your children reading and writing in Arabic?
4. Do you teach them reading and writing in English?

5. How do you help your children in learning English before school?

6. When did you start with your children reading and writing? In what age were they when you started teaching them reading and writing and in what basis?

7. How did you start this process, did you start with reading, or writing?

8. Do you depend on your own knowledge in teaching them, or do you depend on certain techniques? Do you have a regular access to the libraries in town?

9. Do you set a regular schedule for this process?

10. Do you feel that these practices have its positive impact on them?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am interested in knowing the results of this study that will reveal Arabs’ concepts in teaching their children English before they join school especially in this Campus town. The results will help in categorizing their concepts as well as techniques in helping their children to learn the language of the community that they live in.
References


Consent Form for Participation in Research Study

I am currently conducting a research study about the role of using literacy practices by Arab families in teaching their children the English language before they join school in the USA. You are invited to participate in this study that will help me in exploring the effect of those literacy practices in the children’s acquisition of the English language and their participation in school.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a small interview to know your responses about the ways that you do/did with your children to teach them reading and writing before they join school. The interview will be audio recorded to be able to transcribe the data.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There are no risks or discomforts expected as a result of your participation beyond those that exist in everyday life, and you are free to withdraw from the study by just contacting me and letting me know that you want to withdraw.

Your responses will remain completely confidential and will not reveal any of your personal information or your identity. I will be the only person who has access to this data, which will be kept in a locked place. All audio tapes will be destroyed after being done with the whole study.

If you have any questions, please contact the Responsible Project Investigator and Student Researcher:

- Prof. Catherine Prendergast, Department of English, cprender@illinois.edu (RPI)
- Noha Elsakka, Department of Linguistics, elsakka2@illinois.edu (Student Researcher)

Sincerely,

Noha Elsakka
Graduate Student
Department of Linguistics
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

__________________________________________________________
I am 18 years of age or older. I understand the above information. By signing this form, I voluntarily consent to participate in the study described above. I have been offered a copy of this consent form.

_____ I agree to participate in this study  _____ I DO NOT agree to participate in this study

_____________________________  ______________________________
Signature                        Date
موافقة على المشاركة في دراسة بحثية

أنا حاليا أقوم بعمل دراسة بحثية عن الدور الذي تقوم به الأسر العربية مع أبنائهن في تعلم القراءة والكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية قبل الانتقال بالمدارس الإبتدائية في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. أنتم مدعوين للمشاركة في هذه الدراسة التي ستساعدني في معرفة تأثير هذه الممارسات على اكتساب الأطفال للغة الإنجليزية ومشاركتهم في المدرسة.

في حالة موافقتكم على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة، سأقوم بإجراء مقابلة صغيرة معلماً لمعرفة رأيكم في الطرق التي مارستوها أو التي تمارسونها مع أطفالكم من أجل تعليمهم القراءة والكتابة قبل الانتقال بالمدرسة. سيتم تسجيل المقابلة صوتياً للتمكن من تفريغ المعلومات.

إن شاركتكم في هذه الدراسة تطوعي و يرجى ملاحظة أنه لن يتم تمثيلكم أي أضرار أو أعباء نتيجة مشاركتكم في هذه الدراسة غير التي تحدث في الحياة اليومية. ويعين علىكم الانسحاب من الدراسة إذا ما أردتم، وذلك بإخطاري بأنتم ترغبون في الانسحاب من الدراسة.

إن أرائهكم سرية ولن تصبح عن هوبرت أو بياناتكم الشخصية. لا أحد سيتمكن من الوصول لهذه المعلومات والتي سأقوم بوضعها في مكان ممكن. بالإضافة إلى أنني سأقوم بتمييز كل الشروط بعد الانتهاء من الدراسة بأكملها.

إذا كان لديك أي استفسارات يمكنكم الاتصال بالمسؤول الرئيسي للبحث وطالبة البحث:

- المسؤول الرئيسي للبحث: الأستاذين كاثرين برنديرجاست، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، cprender@illinois.edu
- طالبة البحث: نهى السقا، قسم اللغويات، elsakka2@illinois.edu

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الاحترام;
نرى السقا
طالبة دراسات عليا
قسم اللغويات
جامعة إلوي في أربانا- شميين

أقر أنا الموقع أدناه أني أبلغ من العمر ما لا يقل عن ثمانية عشر عاما. أني قد قررت واستوعبت كل المعلومات الواردة في هذه الصيغة. وتوقعني لهذه الصيغة أكون موافقاً تطوعياً على المشاركة في الدراسة المذكورة سابقا. وقد استلمت نسخة من هذه الصيغة.

لا أوافق على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة
أوافق على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة

التاريخ
الإمضاء
Appendix

Interview Questions in Arabic:

 أسئلة المقابلة:

1. حدثني عن تعليمك بصفة عامة وتعليمك اللغة الإنجليزية بصفة خاصة؟

2. هل تتذكرين بعض من الأنشطة التي مارستها معك والدك لتتعلم القراءة والكتابة بالعربية أو حتى الإنجليزية؟

3. هل تعلمن أولادك القراءة والكتابة بالعربية؟

4. هل تعلمن أولادك القراءة والكتابة بالإنجليزية؟

5. كيف تعلمن أولادك اللغة الإنجليزية قبل التحاقهم بالمدرسة؟

6. متى بدأت معهم القراءة والكتابة؟ كم كانت أعمارهم وعلى أي أساس؟

7. كيف بدأت معهم، هل بدأت بالقراءة أم بالكتابة؟

8. هل تعتمدين على معلوماتك الشخصية في تعليمهم أم تعتمدين على وسائل أخرى؟ هل تعتمدين على المكتبات في المدينة هنا بشكل دوري؟

9. هل تحددين جدول منتظم لهذه العملية؟

10. هل تعتقد أن هذه الممارسات لها تأثير إيجابي عليهم؟