

**Exploring Children's First Contact with MSA in  
Divergent Primary Schools:  
A Comparative Study in TLEMCEN**

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**Abstract**

In Algeria, all children are exposed to the vernacular whether at home or in neighbourhood, whereas Modern Standard Arabic is only accessible through formal instruction. This study focuses on the extent to which Arabic diglossia affects the learning process among pupils studying in distinct grades at primary level. In parallel, it indicates the impact of such phenomenon on pupils' linguistic skills in classroom interaction. This paper is a plea to reconsider pupils' feelings when they are first faced with Modern Standard Arabic at school and the main language difficulties they confront. Through collecting and analyzing data by means of a questionnaire and an interview, we have tried, in this study, to compare between two school settings to show the extent to which diglossia affects the learning process, firstly by exploring the variety used in classroom interaction and secondly, by insisting on the language difficulties encountered by young pupils.

**Key words:** *Diglossia ; Pupils ; Learning ; Modern Standard Arabic ; Language Difficulties*

**Résumé**

En Algérie, tous les enfants sont exposés à la langue vernaculaire que ce soit à la maison ou dans leur quartier, alors que l'arabe standard est seulement accessible à travers l'instruction formelle. Cette étude se concentre sur la mesure dans laquelle la diglossie arabe affecte le processus d'apprentissage parmi les élèves de différents grades au niveau primaire. En parallèle, elle indique l'impact de ce phénomène sur les compétences linguistiques des élèves dans l'interaction en classe. Ce travail est une demande à reconsidérer les sentiments des élèves quand ils font face à l'arabe standard pour la première fois à l'école, ainsi que les difficultés langagières qu'ils affrontent. A travers la collecte des données à l'aide d'un questionnaire et d'une interview, on a essayé, dans cette étude, de comparer entre deux écoles primaires différentes dans le but de montrer à quel point la diglossie affecte le processus d'apprentissage, premièrement en explorant la variété utilisée dans l'interaction en classe et deuxièmement, en insistant sur les difficultés langagières rencontrées par les jeunes élèves.

**Mots clés :** *Diglossie ; élèves ; apprentissage ; Arabe standard ; difficultés langagières*

### Introduction

Arabic is often considered a “diglossic” language designating the existence of a High variety, (H) and a low variety (L) used in semi-exclusive situations, that is the two distinct forms are kept disjoint and used in distinct settings, and for distinct purposes. H is sometimes referred to as *Fuṣḥa*, Classical Arabic, Literary Arabic, Standard Arabic or Modern Standard Arabic (MSA hereafter). L is referred to simply as a vernacular, spoken Arabic, colloquial Arabic, “*aammiya*”, or Algerian Arabic (AA henceforth). L has no official status as it is adopted in daily life and more relaxed settings such as family and friends.

The fact is that MSA is the mother tongue of no sector in the Algerian speech community – nor is it in any other Arab country – and children do not become aware of it until school age while AA, though highly stigmatized, is the authentic mother tongue acquired first and used in daily life. Arab pupils in general and Algerians in particular, show a kind of deficiency in understanding and mainly in communicating in MSA especially during the early years of their schooling since they have little or no contact with MSA outside the school milieu.

This study endeavours at investigating pupils’ perceptions when they are first confronted to the standard form of Arabic in school, in addition to the principal language difficulties they confront. In an attempt to treat the issue, the following overall question is raised: How does the phenomenon of diglossia affect the learning process among first grade pupils in primary schools?

#### 1. Diglossia in Arabic:

According to Ferguson (1959), a diglossic context is defined by two features: The first is a distinction between the written and spoken modes. The second is a rigid complementarity of two sets of functions performed by two distinct, though linguistically related codes. In a diglossic situation, there is a coexistence of two language varieties, and in the specific case of Arabic, one variety is used for ordinary conversation and the other is learned by means of formal education and it is generally used for written and educational purposes.

A non- linguistic characteristic of Arabic diglossia is that the high variety is learned through formal education, contrary to the low variety, which is acquired naturally from birth. H possesses an established norm for grammar, orthography, pronunciation, and vocabulary by contrast to L, which lacks a written grammar.

More recently, heated discussions have developed over the use of the term “Arabic diglossia”. Indeed, Ferguson’s classical version that diglossia is “two varieties of a language exist[ing] side by side... with each having a definite role to play” (1959: 325) should be re-evaluated through the use of the

term ‘Arabic multiglossia’ since more than two varieties of Arabic come at play. The coalescence between CA and colloquial Arabic seems to pave the way to the creation of a new variety of Arabic known as *the middle variety* used in semi-formal situations. This is the main reason why diglossia in the Arab world is suggested to be rather a multiglossia.

Essentially, MSA, Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA henceforth) and colloquial Arabic constitute a continuum from which, native speakers may select the available variety at different times and occasions. In any case, Arab scholars have to spend remarkable efforts to clarify the concept of diglossia because the Arabic language situation seems to be very complicated as members of the same speech community cross different repertoires. Furthermore, because it is characterized by the use of two varieties in complementary distribution, diglossia has its impact on the field of education.

## **2. Diglossia and Education**

Some Arab educational specialists are fully aware that the low educational achievement and literacy rates in most Arab communities are mostly due to the diglossic situation of the Arabic language. However, many researchers proclaim that this sociolinguistic issue delays literacy acquisition because of a lack of clear relation between speech and literacy (Abu Rabia 2000; Saeigh Haddad 2003). According to Maamouri (1998), the widespread functional illiteracy in the Arab world is due to diglossia which has a negative impact on the ability of Arab children to acquire Arabic reading and writing skills, and consequently on their academic attainment in general.

Arab pupils are required to suppress most of their habitual speech while trying to acquire a new set of rules once in contact with school. However, the mixture of Arabic linguistic patterns seems to lead to serious pedagogical problems, in addition to a kind of feeling of linguistic insecurity during classroom interaction among a high number of young Arab pupils. Maamouri (1998:40) explains that: “this lack of security comes from a general feeling of low understanding of modern fusha and of low identification of its norms”. Arab school- children are taught the standard form of Arabic, although their mother tongue is spoken Arabic.

MSA is distinct from spoken Arabic in phonology, vocabulary, grammar and syntax, which means that these children are confronted to a variety of Arabic with which they have relatively little contact. Zughoul (1980: 202) concludes that: “The diglossic situation is indeed problematic for a linguistic community. It is considered to be a hindrance to educational and economic development, as well as a national coherence.”

### 3. MSA and Education

MSA is first encountered in schools and can be perceived almost as a second language (Ayari, 1996; Ibrahim, 1997). In this sense, Maamouri (1998) argues that MSA is not easy to learn and use for, it is nobody's native language. In addition, he claims that MSA and dialectal Arabic code switching constitute a major cause of serious pedagogical problems that can result in an inadequate language competence, low linguistic self-confidence and consequent social problems.

Indeed, the state of MSA in Arabic classrooms is very intricate. This intricacy lies in the intermingling of Arabic language patterns. Such a matter may certainly lead to "pedagogical problems and even to linguistic insecurity in formal school communication among high number of young Arab learners" as asserted by Maamouri (1998: 40). Maamouri (ibid) proposed an establishment of training programmes for Arabic teachers by the educational authorities in order to improve the level of their reading standards. He also stresses the importance of this measure because when the Arabic course teachers demonstrate a high fluency in the language of instruction (MSA), the pupils will inevitably follow their example, and will certainly be encouraged to learn from them. Illiterate Arabs and especially Arab school- children may probably stop believing that the Arabic language is difficult to be learned.

### 4. Children's Exposure to MSA

One important issue that characterizes Arab formal education, as already mentioned, is that the language of instruction differs significantly from pupils' mother tongue. It is obvious that all Arab parents use the colloquial forms of Arabic when conversing with their off spring at home, and therefore MSA is no one's mother tongue and it is almost never used in day-to-day communication, while the textbooks in schools are based on the literary language.

Consequently, Arab children first encounter MSA in schools. Outside the school milieu, their exposure to MSA is confined to educational and TV programmes such as cartoons and documentaries, or literary events depending on the environment to which the child belongs. In addition, children hear their parents pray in CA and their siblings do their homework in MSA.

Abu- Rabia (2000), a prominent Arab scholar proposed that reading complexities in elementary schools are attributed to Arabic diglossia for, the language used as a medium of instruction differs from the colloquial forms used at home. In his study, Abu- Rabia compared the performance of reading comprehension between first and second grade children who had been experimentally exposed to MSA throughout their preschool period. He found that early exposure of Arab preschool children to MSA may improve their

performance in reading comprehension tests two years later. In this line of thought, Abu-Rabia (2000: 149) says, “reading skills in the early years of a child’s life are essential for the acquisition of knowledge in later schooling.”

Another investigation concerning the performance of kindergarten and first grade pupils on phonemic awareness tasks was done by Saiegh Haddad (2003) who noticed that when the phoneme was standard and embedded in a standard word syllabic structure, the initial phoneme’s isolation was a hard task mainly for kindergarten children. This is due to limited exposure and practice with standard Arabic phonemes.

## **5. Methodological concerns and data analysis**

This part is devoted to the methodology and analysis of the collected data.

### **a- Methodological concerns and research tools**

This work adopts a descriptive approach which aims at investigating the phenomenon of diglossia for the purpose of understanding its implications. This approach is viewed as an analytic method based on accurate and adequate information about such phenomenon (or specific topic) through a defined period of time in order to obtain practical results to be analyzed and interpreted as objectively as possible. Through the use of different sociolinguistic tools, the data were collected in the period from January-May 2017.

In order to provide the present study with trustworthiness, two types of research tools were administered to our respondents. First, an interview was conducted with teachers to know more about the kind of difficulties pupils encounter when they are first faced with MSA and a questionnaire was given to pupils where the researcher was present in order to guide them. The researcher herself participated through giving questions seeking at reaching the linguistic forms she had fixed as a goal in mind. She had to employ several tactics to obtain reliable results. For instance, she used to give them some sweets or some modest toys, or sometimes she had to narrate stories before asking them any question to attract their attention and to collect the maximum data.

The interview held with teachers was unstructured, with unpredictable answers and aimed to find out more information. 6 teachers were chosen from both schools on the basis of their teaching experience. Some of them were interviewed in class, while others during the break time.

### **b- Sample population**

As the present study aims at exploring children’s first contact with MSA, the first grade level is taken as a case in point and the sample population consists of two groups of respondents: First grade pupils as well as teachers of the Arabic course. The sample population has been selected from two different primary schools (PS, hereafter) in Tlemcen, a town situated in the north-west

of Algeria, and includes 62 pupils and 6 teachers with a long experience in this field (14 years and beyond), and who are supposed to provide us with reliable data. 32 pupils and 4 teachers were chosen from *Ibn Msaib* PS, and 30 pupils and 2 teachers from *Mustapha Chiali* PS. The pupils' age ranges from 5-7 years old. Though both teachers and pupils are participants in classroom interaction, we concentrate particularly on pupils' speech since they have relatively little or no contact with the official language of education before formal schooling.

### c- Results from the interview with teachers

#### **Qu1: Is it easy for pupils to use MSA in classroom interaction?**

All teachers affirmed that at the beginning, it is always quite a hard task, especially for those who did not have access to pre-schooling, but with practice and all the efforts spent on the part of teachers and parents, pupils show a clear amelioration by the end of the school-year. A female teacher said: *“at the beginning, it is very hard, and the teacher is obliged to use AA when explaining the lessons. If in the beginning, the teacher uses MSA only, the pupils will show some disgust, but as the proverb says: practice makes perfect”*.

#### **Qu2: What are the main language difficulties that pupils encounter when using MSA in classroom interaction?**

All the teachers insist on lexical as well as phonological difficulties. A male teacher who had an experience of twenty years affirmed: *‘pupils in general feel a kind of linguistic insecurity as they lack vocabulary in MSA and do not pronounce correctly some words, especially those phonemes which appear to be the same. I always insist on the right pronunciation of these consonants’*.

#### **Qu3: What reasons stand behind pupils' linguistic deficiency?**

The first teacher claimed: *‘Because of lack of practice at home, pupils have great difficulties when interacting with their teachers’*. Another one said: *‘this is mainly due to the syllabus which emphasizes on reading and writing skills rather than on practicing the language.’* Still another one affirmed that: *‘Most teachers use their dialects when explaining the lessons and they are doing a disservice to pupils. The teacher sets an example; if he uses solely MSA in class, the pupils will inevitably follow and learn from him, since their memory is still fresh’*.

#### **Qu4: Does the use of the vernacular in the classroom affect pupils' linguistic attainment?**

All teachers said, *‘yes, of course’*. A female teacher reported, *‘the use of the vernacular is limited to some situations outside the school. I am a teacher of Arabic, so I have to use MSA when explaining the lessons. We have to root this*

'language' in pupils' minds since it is the real language, the language of Qur'an and I hope that one day everyone will use it as a mother tongue'.

**d- Findings from the questionnaire to pupils**

In designing the questionnaire, we took into consideration the easiness and intelligibility of the items in order to avoid the ambiguity expected during the answers. Pupils from both primary schools were divided into three groups of 10 children, to the exception of one group at *Ibn Msaib* primary school which was composed of 12 pupils. The learners were interviewed on the basis of simple questions.

**Qu1: By which variety can you express yourself better in classroom interaction?**

**Table 1. Pupils' use of MSA vs. AA in class**

Varieties	MSA	AA
Ibn Msaib N= 32	18 / 56.25%	14 / 43.75%
MustaphaChiali N=30	8 / 26.67%	22 / 73.33%

In the first question, the pupils of each PS where asked about the variety in which they express themselves better in classroom interaction. Surprisingly, 56.25% of pupils from *Ibn Msaib* PS reported that it is MSA, while the majority (73.33%) of pupils from *Mustapha Chiali* PS affirmed that it is AA, as shown in the table above.

**Qu2: Do you understand MSA?**

**Table 2. The understanding skill in MSA in class**

	Yes	No
Ibn Msaib N= 32	18/ 56.25%	14/ 43.75%
Mustapha Chiali N=30	12/ 40%	18/ 60%

Similarly, the scores obtained above show that , the majority of pupils of *Ibn Msaib* PS with a rate of 56.25% said that they understand MSA, while 43.75% affirmed that they do not understand it well. Conversely, in *Mustapha Chiali* 40% claimed that they comprehend MSA, whereas 60% of the respondents confirmed that MSA is not understood accurately.

**Qu3: Is it easy to learn MSA?**

**Table 3. Pupils' perception about learning MSA**

	Yes	No	A little
Ibn Msaib N= 32	18/ 56.25%	10/ 31.25%	4/ 12.50%
Mustapha Chiali N= 30	10/ 33.33%	15/ 50%	5/ 16.67%

The results are nearly similar to those obtained in the second question. Again, most pupils with a rate of 56. 25% from *Ibn Msaib* PS reported that it is easy to learn Standard Arabic, 31.25% said that it is not easy, while the others

claimed that it is a little bit easy to learn it. However, 33.33% solely of the number of pupils from *Mustapha Chiali* PS affirmed that it easy to learn *fusha*, while 50% claimed ‘No’ and the minority with a rate of 16.67% acknowledged that it is a little bit easy to learn MSA.

**Qu4: How well do you speak MSA?**

**Table 4. Pupils’ proficiency in speaking MSA**

	Perfectly	A little bit	Not at all
Ibn Msaib N= 32	8 / 25%	20 / 62.50%	4 / 12.50%
Mustapha Chiali N=30	2 / 6.67%	16 / 53.33%	12 / 40%

Here, the informants were asked to determine their degree of proficiency in speaking MSA, thus we found that over 32 respondents in *Ibn Msaib* PS, MSA was said to be spoken perfectly by 25%, a little bit spoken by 62.50% and not at all produced by 12.50%. On the other hand, in *Mustapha Chiali* PS, MSA was affirmed to be produced perfectly by only 6.67%, a little bit spoken by a higher rate of pupils 53.33% and not at all used by 40%.

**6. Discussion**

Pedagogically, teachers from both schools did not mention the morpho-syntactic differences between MSA and AA which may eventually cause problems. Hence, they focused mainly on the lexical problems as well as on the phonological difficulties encountered by most pupils in classroom interaction. This can be explained by the fact that most pupils have relatively little or no acquaintance with MSA outside the school environment.

Undoubtedly, the classroom interaction variety has great effect on teaching quality, and thus on the pupils’ linguistic behaviour in general. when asked if the vernacular use in the classroom affects pupils’ linguistic attainment, the answers obtained from the majority of informants contrast with their claims when asked to report about the variety used in classroom interaction. Teachers from *Ibn Msaib* also affirmed that it is quite hard for pupils to use MSA in classroom interaction, but they stressed the fact that it is mainly difficult in the beginning of the school-year.

It is obvious that the language used by pupils at home or in the neighbourhood differs to a large extent from literary Arabic. On the other hand, teachers from *Mustapha Chiali* declared that it is not an easy task because of the non-existence of pre-school grade in this school. From this, one may deduce that pre-schooling is very important to pupils before moving to the first grade, as it enhances their linguistic proficiency in MSA.

When asked about the variety in which they express themselves better in classroom interaction, pupils’ responses were in contradiction with their teachers’ arguments, as 18 informants with a rate of 56, 25% from *Ibn Msaib*



PS affirmed having a better command of MSA use, while the number of pupils reporting to speak AA better is slightly lower. On the other hand, pupils from *Mustapha Chiali* PS reported to have better proficiency in AA use when interacting with teachers, and a remarkable deficiency in MSA use in classroom interaction, which could be interpreted thus: most of the times these pupils use their dialects in the classroom interaction due to their disability in MSA communicative skills. Nevertheless, when we consider some pupils' claims, we can deduce that parents' contribution is of paramount importance in motivating and helping their children to use MSA.

Again, the majority of informants from *Ibn Msaib* PS acknowledged comprehending MSA and for them, fusha, is quite easy to learn. The other group of respondents from *Mustapha Chiali* affirmed the opposite. Thus, for the majority, MSA is not at all easy to learn, nor is it easy to understand. Moreover, the majority pointed out that they find it difficult to express themselves in MSA in classroom interaction due to their disability in finding the accurate lexical words to express themselves, in addition to the difficulties in pronouncing words correctly in MSA.

Indeed, the scarce use of MSA in classroom interaction by some pupils seems to make them feel when talking in MSA, as if they were speaking a foreign unfamiliar language and consequently, they feel embarrassment and insecurity. This behaviour definitely supports the diglossic situation in the classrooms and impedes the achievement of the desired objectives of the learning process.

### **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, the findings of this empirical work have revealed that strenuous efforts are made by the majority of pupils when using MSA in classroom interaction because of their language flaws in the standard variety. Frustration and low linguistic self-confidence felt by young pupils are due to their inability to find the adequate words to express their ideas effectively in MSA. However, the results have also shown that pupils from *Ibn Msaib* PS slightly outperform pupils from *Mustapha Chiali* for, the former has benefited from pre-schooling, whereas the latter has been deprived from this privilege. Another important reason relating to better proficiency is that pupils who were exposed early to literary Arabic have more chance for success than pupils whose exposure to the standard variety is reduced or totally absent before formal instruction.

On the basis of our findings, some strategies can be highly recommended. Indeed, it will be beneficial if all the teachers of Arabic abandon the use of the dialect in teaching their lessons and place more emphasis on the standard variety so that pupils can understand what constitutes real Arabic and what does not. Moreover, teachers and parents should enhance positive pupils' attitudes towards MSA and constantly encourage them to be

much closer to this variety either inside or outside the school milieu, and parents' awareness about the drawbacks of limiting their children's exposure to MSA during early childhood should be raised. In other words, parents should converse from time to time with their children with MSA and they should expose them to this variety either through television programmes (cartoon networks) or through short stories. This will facilitate the task of reading and understanding MSA years later. Another suggestion would be to create interesting resources (current topics, visually appealing) and role models who communicate in MSA (cartoon characters, clowns, funny characters, action heroes, etc.) in all schools in order to make pupils closer to MSA and facilitate the assimilation and comprehension of this form of Arabic.

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