

# Storybook Reading in the Arab World

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## ABSTRACT

Storybook reading at the kindergarten level is not given adequate attention by Arab parents and caregivers due to the perspective that children do not understand formal Arabic/FusHa and those children do not enjoy being read to from books. However, a body of research supports the hypothesis that storybook reading has a positive impact on children's literacy development and reading interest. In support with the research findings, the results drawn from the current study which targeted Arab kindergartners indicated that exposing children to storybook reading appears to support early literacy for Arab kindergartners. There was a noticeable increase in the proportion of formal Arabic vocabulary and clauses in the kids' utterances. Kindergartners have showed a positive progress on measures of comprehension and richly use of vocabulary and complex sentences in telling picture stories. Besides using words in FusHa, the children's speech has tended to become more distinct and more grammatical. They will pronounce the end of words more clearly and can distinguish between singular and plural forms- both of these attributes of literary Arabic. Most importantly, the children's reading motivation was positively influenced.

**Keywords:** *storybook, reading*

## INTRODUCTION

Being in America for several years, I noted that storybook reading was given a great deal of attention in kindergarten classes in the United States. Storybook reading is the process by which the teacher/parent shares the content of storybooks with children, while at the same time encouraging social interaction (reading, showing illustrations, and encouraging student participation and conversation). This early exposure to storybook reading appears to support early literacy for American school children. I was wondering if reading storybooks to Arab children by Arab adults (e.g., parents, grandparents, siblings, friends...) will have a positive impact on Arab children's reading interest and literacy skills.

Arab parents believe that children do not understand formal Arabic and that children do not enjoy being read to from books. According to Ayari (1996) Arab children face a lot of difficulties learning the Arabic language mostly due to its "diglossic nature" (as cited in Fedda & Oweini, 2012, p. 351). Diglossia refers to the existence of two varieties of the same language: the standard Arabic or "FusHa" and the colloquial or "Ammiyya" (Versteegh, 2001, p. 189) which are linguistically distant (Saiegh-Haddad, 2003). Thus, language acceptance rather than social background seems to be the decisive factor in parents not reading to their children. An unfortunate consequence of the absence of story reading among Arab kindergartners is that these young children are deprived of knowledge and skills that will probably best aid their transition to literacy.

The reading habit among Arab families falls under one of the following categories: parents read to their children from books in very rare cases, more commonly, parents orally recite stories they remember from their own

childhood. And in the remaining families, parents use books in storytelling sessions but do not read from them. Instead, having read the story previously on their own, they relate it orally in Ammiyya while showing their children the illustrations. I became interested in the storybook reading activities that would make sense to Arab kindergartners and help them learn the formal, written register (i.e., formal literary Arabic) required in Arabic schools. Thus, it became my goal to share a number of Arabic storybooks with Arab children for a certain period of time to investigate the influence of storybook reading on Arab kindergartners' literacy development and reading motivation. To achieve this goal, I was extra careful that the selected storybooks use simple literary Arabic language targeting young children.

### Storybook Reading

Storybook reading has become an increasingly influential activity in preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Proponents perceive it as one of the most meaningful activities for providing children with positive literacy experiences (Elster, 1994; Karweit, 1989; Teale, 1978; Wells, 1986). "Also, Yaden (1989) describes it as an activity that facilitates development of preschool children's ability to construct meaning in the context of a book and as a model of the rhythm and patterns of written language" (p. 208). Sulzby and Teal (1991) describe storybook reading as a social, creative, and interactive activity.

### The Influence of Storybook Reading on Children's Literacy Development

Several studies have reported the constructive influence of storybook reading on children's literacy development. Otto's (1993) studies suggest that storybook reading programs increase children's involvement and interaction with storybooks in ways that spark increased literacy skills. For example, the results of one such study, which was designed to encourage urban kindergartners' daily interaction with storybooks at home and at school, reveal that seventy five percent of parents reported an increase in their children's interest in reading and literacy-related behaviors. Moreover, eighty-eight percent of these parents stated that their children engaged in storybook reading daily or several times a week.

Various inquiries into the benefits of storybook reading in the classroom suggest that it significantly improves a child's acquisition of new vocabulary, reading comprehension, book concept, internalization of reading behavior, decoding, and motivation to read. Storybook readers also experience increased social interactions with each other and adults through asking questions and conversing with others. Finally, storybook reading is credited with helping children develop comprehension skills, construct meaning by relating their personal experiences to the text of the story, and interact with the text openly as their teacher reads to them (see, for example, Carger, 1993; Clay, 1979; Durkin, 1966; Teale, 1978).

In addition to the benefits mentioned previously, storybook reading is also believed to significantly facilitate language and reading development at school (Teale, 1978; Wells, 1986). Fitelson, Kita, and Goldstein (1986) indicate that exposing children to storybook reading systematically helps them to develop their use of language and increase their reading comprehension.

Other studies on the benefits of storybook reading to children suggest that literacy development does not depend on the act of story reading alone. In fact, other factors such as the interaction between adult and child (which facilitate their ability to construct meaning from text), also contributes to a child's literacy development (Nino & Bruner, 1978). The evidence further implies that the effects of storybook reading on children's literacy development depends to a very large extent on the teacher's enthusiasm, opportunities for interaction with the teacher, and the size of the group (Karweit, 1989). Some even go as far as to say that the social interaction that occurs between an adult and a child is the most important element in storybook reading. In other words, many experts believe that a child's development of knowledge, attitude, and literacy skills is influenced by their social interactions (Sulzby, 1985; Teale, 1978; Teale & Sulzby, 1987).

Many investigators suggest a direct correlation between reading to children and their ability to read or succeed at school. Durkin's (1966) study of children who develop reading skills early demonstrates that these children were read to by others, such as parents or siblings. In keeping with this theory, a report from the National Institute of Education stated that "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985).

Several studies have explored possible relationships between being read to and particular aspects of literacy development. Wells (1986) presents a compelling argument in support of the fact that listening to stories and talking about them is a fundamental and significant source for increased vocabulary development. In another study, Purcell-

Gates, McIntyre, and Freppon (1995) examined the relationship between language development and literacy acquisition. They tested the hypothesis that children generally develop their knowledge of the written language over time through experiences with books. The results of their investigation revealed that while all the kindergartners in the study group had already developed some linguistic knowledge, the disparity in their literacy levels was significantly affected by the different methods of preschool instruction. Children in whole language classrooms learned more about written language than children in the skills-based curriculum. This study suggests that children can develop their knowledge by listening to stories and actively responding to them.

Recognizing the critical importance of reading stories to children, several researchers have focused on the best ways to maximize the benefits. Peters (1993), for example, emphasizes the role and place of story reading in the classroom, indicating that prescribed guidelines and practices should be considered when reading stories to children. In fact, she argues that story reading at school should be not thought of as a coincidental activity or simple practice. Instead, Peters suggests that teachers regard story reading as a fundamental aspect of the curriculum and carefully consider when and how to engage in story reading. This leads us to assume that even when parents read for their children they need to use their skillful reading habits to make the reading experience more enjoyable and more beneficial.

## METHOD

### Participants

Two Arab kindergartners were the participants in this study, Omar a six-year old male; came to America when he was 2 years old and Aya a five-year old female moved to the US at age one. Their parents were graduate students at one of the American top ten universities. The language spoken at home was Arabic. The children attended the Islamic school two days a week (Sundays and Fridays) for three hours each session to learn two subjects only: Islamic Studies and Arabic language; where they received instructions in reading, writing, and speaking Arabic.

### Materials

**Children's story books.** Criteria for story selection were (a) content that attracts children, (b) a narrative style, and (c) grammatically correct yet not archaic language. A search of available Arabic children's books revealed a preponderance of heavily moralistic material written in abstract and extremely difficult language. Consequently, 12 of the 20 stories that served as experimental texts were not originally Arabic children's books. Only eight Arabic stories were used in their original form, four were translations of English stories, four were bilingual stories-written in both English and Arabic texts, and four electronic simplified narratives. The language, of most of the stories, resembled Modern Standard Arabic, an in-between medium that is used today in newspapers and other mass media in Arabic-speaking societies. In other words, the language used in the storybooks, while not always literally "FusHa," was still considered "literary language" significantly different from their daily language for the purpose of this study. For the space limitation, I have reflected in this paper on 4 storybooks: 1 Arabic, 1 translated, 1 bilingual, and 1 electronic narrative.

**Post assessment tools.** Four pictures were used for a picture-storytelling task as a post measure for the participating children. Also an Arabic text taken from *Arabic for Beginners* (an Arabic textbook used in the Islamic school for kindergartners) served as a post assessment tool to measure children's comprehension.

### Data Collection and Analysis

### Storybook Reading Procedure

Usually, the shared reading session would start with unstructured discussion on the target text. The investigator may talk about the book cover, illustrations, title...Then they may start a picture walk while inviting the children to predict the topic of the story... Sometimes, before starting to read, the investigator would explain no more than three key words, without which children might not be able to understand the story. While reading, the investigator was to append Ammiyya terms to FusHa expressions she thought children might find difficult.

### Examples of the Storybook Reading Sessions

As mentioned earlier, the investigator shared a number of Arabic picture books with the participating children. The section below includes an example on each book category and a reflection on each reading experience.

**Arabic picture book.** Generally speaking, Arabic children's books deal with different topics; good and evil, morals, good behavior, family relations, caring for animals, etc. The following is an example of an Arabic book that has been shared with the participants.

We shared *Ausrati (My family)* Arabic book which is about five-year-old Sarah who is introducing her family members. Here is a translation of the book's contents.

- This is my Father
- This is my Mother
- This is my brother
- These are my grandparents.
- I love my family.
- The End.

The investigator asked if the participating children liked the book and why, the following are some of the responses:

- Aya: I liked the pictures because Sarah's mom and grandmother put on a head cover like my mom.
- Omar: The grand mother looks funny, she is kind of ugly.
- Investigator: Is it fun to read in Arabic?
- Omar: This book is short and easy I can read it all by my self, but I do not like long ones, I get bored when I read them.
- Aya: I do not understand the story when you read it, but when you spoke it out loud, I liked it.

**Comments on *Ausrati/My family*.** When we started, I would read them one line and explain one line. These children for example, did not know what the formal Arabic words 'Ausrati' (my family), or Jadati (grandmother) mean. According to my observations, in the early days children had spoken up only rarely, but had done so whenever they felt like it. After three weeks of the experiment I would explain no more than three key words, without which children might not be able to understand the story. While reading I was to append Ammiyya terms to FusHa expressions I think children might find difficult. After a month or so I read them a whole page at a time, and they followed and comprehended.

Although I noticed a positive progress in the children's literacy skills and reading interest, I felt that the Arabic books didn't meet the children's expectations or interests. I tried my best to make the Arabic books as challenging and as interesting as I could. Although I had challenged them by asking questions, connecting the story with their life interests, and encouraging them to do art work or act the story out, yet the kids felt bored or not totally engaged. To be honest, I do not blame them because I have noticed that most of the available Arabic books lack the basic elements of children's literature. In the previous book *Ausrati*, for example, the author just kept saying this is my dad, this is my mom, etc. Where is the excitement element? Or even the story's events have been selected with no attempt to draw the reader's imagination or creativity. The story asks youngsters to respect their parents, but these morals are conveyed in a direct way that makes children quit reading.

After all, I realized that the lack of reading interest among Arab children was not just about language, it was also about the quality of the Arabic children's books. Some books were published over 50 years ago and include some fairytales that may no longer be suitable for today's child. A journalist in the *Magazine Of Egypt* ironically commented on the Children's Book Fair at the Cairo International Conference which ran December 1–6, 2006, saying, "Why is it that the Children's Book Fair is always well attended by hordes of schoolchildren enjoying a day trip with their

teachers, yet very few of them carry any books on their way out? Why should children be taken to the edge of the water only to be whisked away thirsty?" (Egypt Children's Book Fair). Then he claimed that some publishing houses found the fair to be a good opportunity to peddle all kinds of books that had nothing to do with children, including titles on religion, cookery, knitting and even politics. That's why Arab children hate books.

**Translated storybooks.** Eric Carle's classic *The Very Hungry Caterpillar/ Alyaraqah Al Ja'ah Jidan* was translated from English into Arabic. It is very engaging book with skillful illustrations on the stages of a butterfly.

#### Comments on The Very Hungry Caterpillar/ Alyaraqah Al Ja'ah Jidan.

- Investigator: Have you ever seen a caterpillar with so many colors?
- Omar: I have seen a green one only, I have seen one but it was not real.
- Investigator: How big is a caterpillar? Is it as big as this book?
- Aya: No it is as long as my finger. When it is sleeping it is as big as a jelly bean.
- Investigator: What will happen when the caterpillar is full?
- Omar: He will get fat. He will be a butterfly. My science teacher told us that. Yes, I have seen this in the "Big Big World" in the TV.
- Investigator: I need every one of you to make his/her Arabic book that has pictures of the caterpillar on one side and the things that he ate on the other side.
- Investigator: Now can you act out the story for me?

Children hid under the table then started to crawl, after they got out, they pretended to eat most of the items mentioned in the story. Finally, they pretended flying as a butterfly. They were not only engaged in the play but with paint and writing as well. They made an Arabic book about themselves and what they ate on different days of the week.

Eric Carle is brilliantly innovative designer and artist, and he has dramatized the story of one of nature's commonest yet loveliest marvels, the metamorphosis of the butterfly, in a picture book that can delight as well as instruct the very youngest reader or listener. The bilingual text facilitated the children's comprehension of the story. Whenever they listened to an unfamiliar word in Arabic the teacher would read the English counterpart. Cleverly die-cut pages show what the caterpillar eats on successive days, graphically introducing sets of up to 10 objects and also the names of the days of the week in rotation, as well as telling the central story of the transformation of the caterpillar. The final, double-page picture of the butterfly is a joyous explosion of color. Children have enjoyed learning most of the words that have been mentioned in the story; names of food, names of the days of the week, stages of butterfly, etc. in English and Arabic languages.

**Bilingual storybooks.** *The Journey of Ibn Batuta* . This book is written in both Arabic and English. The investigator would comment on the illustrations and read the Arabic print. "In the days when the earth was flat and Jerusalem was the center of the world, there was a boy named Ibn Battuta." So begins this wonderful book about the great Muslim traveler who began on a journey to Hajj (pilgrimage) and returned 29 years later, having traveled from Morocco into North Africa and throughout Asia. He shares his experiences as a Muslim scholar and traveler on colorful pages accompanied by Arabic calligraphy that adorns ancient style maps in this beautifully crafted book.

#### Comments on The Journey of Ibn Batuta.

- Investigator: Lets make-believe and ride behind Ibn-batuta on his donkey, to explore the world with him. Let's say together goodbye [to our relatives], and turn our donkey east, from Tangier to Mecca.
- Investigator: Now, we are in Jerusalem.
- Omar: Wow! This city is in my country Palestine. We have many pictures at home of Jerusalem.
- Investigator: Ready, we will cross the bridge to reach Mecca.
- Aya: Look! This is the ka'ba (a mosque-like place where Muslims go for pilgrimage). My Islamic studies'

teacher showed us [a similar picture] of Ka'ba.

- Aya: yes we made believe that we are pilgrims praying around the Ka'ba.
- Omar: (pointing to the picture) Why Ibn Batuta dresses up this way? Do pilgrims dress up like him?
- Investigator: Muslim men dress up [in a white] uniform when they go to Hajj (pilgrimage).
- Investigator: Are you tired guys? We need to rest in this country called Maser/Egypt.
- Omar: My father visited Egypt. How many hours is Egypt from the US?
- Investigator: This is Tunis. Do you have any friends from Tunisia?
- Aya: No... look! This is Jamal/ a camel.
- Investigator: Do you know that camel lives in the desert, and many people ride camels in the Arab World, and eat its flesh too?
- Investigator: (pointing to the print on the tea pot). Do you know what language is this?
- Omar: Chinese, which means we are in china. I have many friends in the English school who are from China.
- Investigator: We have been away from Morocco for 29 years, don't you think its time to go back home?

This map-like book introduces children to some Arabic countries, ancient Arabic calligraphy, and Muslim-Arabic traditional dressing. The English text describes Ibn batuta's journey in detail, while the Arabic text mainly covers the names of the countries that Ibn batuta passed by. It is a good chance for the children to study the names of some Arabic countries, see pictures of holy places like Ka'ba and Al aqsa mosque, and enjoy the traditional uniform of Arabs and Muslims. The author did not forget to draw the children's attention to the animals that mostly live in the Arab world. Little ones kept asking how a camel and a donkey look, so the researcher thought the best way to explain would be by showing them a movie about these animals. When I shared the book with my children they had the enthusiasm to see these big animals in reality. So I thought the best way to explain would be by searching the internet and show them some moving pictures of these animals. The idea of searching the internet, guided me to think of the effect of electronic books on the children's literacy and reading interest. The other reason for choosing electronic books was to meet the students interests, since all of them are studying and living in a developing country which has started using technology in its classrooms.

**Electronic books.** Electronic books are becoming prevalent in education as one way to teach students about content, literary features such as narrative structure, and even technology itself. These electronic storybooks take traditional oral or print stories, and add graphics, sound, animation, and video to create new interactive storybooks.

*Assa Musa* (Musa's Cane) is an example of the electronic Arabic narratives that was shared. Interestingly, the electronic storybooks have a magical impact on the participating children's literacy skills. They got completely engaged in all the elements of a story. All of these aspects are woven together to tell a rich, multi-sensory story. That's why the children asked the investigator to replay *Assa Musa* (Musa's Cane) several times and still enjoyed it. One day I saw Aya holding the same story book and pretending reading the exact words and phrases that she memorized from the computer. I was amazed to hear her uttering literary Arabic.

Not only has the children's Arabic reading improved but their writing as well. Aya couldn't write in Arabic but she knows her Arabic alphabets. In an attempt to introduce her to Arabic print, I labeled the Arabic letters and stuck them on the computer's keyboard, and then I asked her to type her name and other favorite words that she chose. The kids were very proud of themselves when they printed their names and could read what they typed. In sum, electronic storybooks have demonstrated a significant positive impact on emergent literacy skills.

#### Post Assessment Tasks

At the end of the experiment, two main tasks served as post measures:

Part 1: Students' comprehension and interaction task: with no suitable test for kindergarten-aged children

available in Arabic, I have chosen a unit from their regular textbook *Arabic Language for Beginners* that had not been taught to the children before. The unit included a narrative reading passage followed by a list of comprehension questions and vocabulary exercises. The investigator read the passage and asked ongoing questions while reading, occasionally, the students raised some questions either about the meaning of unfamiliar words or about the story characters or events. This kind of spontaneous discussion helped me in assessing the children's interaction and comprehension of the target passage. This task also allowed me to assess the literacy skills of the kids to consider the impact of the treatment.

I felt it would be fairer for the little kids to consider their overall performance. Therefore, I counted the number of "literary" words that the kids couldn't understand their meanings through out the reading passage. When the text was read to the participants, only 3 words were new to them. Thus the investigator appended the Aammyia terms to FusHa expressions she thought children found difficult. For example the word *Jalas/ sat* was given in colloquial Arabic. To measure the children's comprehension skills, five questions were raised. The students gave 4 correct answers out of five. They failed to answer the following question: "Why do you think the bird put small stones in the jar?" (The answer was: because there was a little bit of water in the bottom of the jar, and the bird could not drink so it put stones to raise the water's level to the top of the jar).

Part 2: Picture-storytelling task: Children's ability to tell a picture story has lately become a preferred way of assessing their language proficiency and knowledge of story schemata (Stein & Glenn, 1982). The task consisted of four pictures. In the first, a girl riding a donkey is distracted by a bird flying overhead. In the second picture, the girl is in the act of falling, after having run into a tree by the roadside. Another girl is running up from a nearby house. In the third picture, the second girl is helping the first, whose arm is hurt. The fourth picture shows both girls in a living room together with a grandmother figure who is bandaging the broken arm.

The investigator spread the pictures in front of the children in the correct sequence, then asked them "to look carefully at the pictures from the beginning (pointing to the first) to the end" (moving their finger along the pictures from first to last). After judging from children's head and eye movements that they had complied, the investigator said, "These pictures tell us a story. Now you tell us the story that these pictures tell, from the beginning (pointing again to the first picture) to the end" (moving her finger along the pictures to the last one, as she had done before). The investigator, then said, "Now Omar will tell us a story." I wrote down a translation of the stories children told in Arabic.

Transcriptions of children's stories were rated according to three main categories:

- Causality: to measure children's ability to draw inferential conclusions on the basis of picture clues.
- Story beginnings: to assess children's familiarity with story conventions (Berman, 1988). Children's ability to introduce characters, and use of settings or openings like "once upon a time".
- Story endings: story endings ranged from supplying a moral, or ending with future implications.

**While the assessment of the children's active use of language depended on:**

- Proportion of words: an estimate of the number of different words children used in telling picture stories. I listened to each child's story and counted the literary words that he/she used. I found that the average number of the literary words used by the kids was 6 literary words.
- Proportion of clauses: approximation of the number of clauses in children's stories. It was really interesting to hear the children uttering full expressions in literary Arabic that they have encountered during the treatment period. I heard them saying the following expression even in play time. "min faDlak"/excuse me. Both kids used 3 literary phrases in their picture stories.

## RESULTS

Above all else, I'm impressed by the way the treatment (reading storybooks) influenced the kindergartner's language development. Literary allusions are appearing in the children's daily discourse. There was a noticeable increase in the proportion of formal Arabic vocabulary and clauses. Kindergartners have showed a positive progress on measures of comprehension and richly use of vocabulary and complex sentences in telling picture stories. Besides using words in FusHa, the children's speech has tended to become more distinct and more grammatical. They will pronounce the end of words more clearly and can distinguish between singular and plural forms- both of these

attributes of literary Arabic. They express themselves much better by using words from the stories. They use both FusHa and Ammiyya in their communications. For example, the children started to use the appropriate forms of the feminine and masculine nouns and verbs. They were able to use *katab/he wrote*, and *katabat/she wrote* in their communications.

The picture stories told by the children indicated that they were also better able to infer causal relationships from illustrations and to use causally connected episodes in telling their stories. In addition, their stories showed that they were more familiar with conventional story endings and more inclined to expect stories to have a moral.

Their switching between FusHa and Ammiyya during story-telling demonstrates that Arab children can acquire a second register through exposure to secondary (formal) discourses without the colloquial language of their home being stigmatized or abandoned.

It is possible to start this process before school entry. Further, exposing children extensively to literary language, without making any overt demands on their own use of oral language, has led to the children's spontaneous use of elements of literary language in everyday situations. Further study will be needed to determine whether children will eventually be able to adapt their choices of register to the needs of the situation and to the level of their developing competence.

## CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, Arab children lack familiarity with literacy language and lack reading interests because Arab parents do not read to children from books. On the other hand, most Arab parents tell oral stories in colloquial Arabic as the available Arabic children's literature use complex classical Arabic which is hard for young children to grasp or enjoy. Thus, I attempted to share storybooks that use simple literary Arabic language targeting Arab young readers. I became increasingly impressed by the changes the study wrought in the children. Whenever they encounter pictures or book illustrations reflecting the Arabic culture, they feel so excited to ask about their heritage or ask about the meaning of new vocabulary or clauses in the book. The children's literacy skills and reading motivation were positively influenced. I became very convinced that listening to stories in FusHa (literary Arabic) has a myriad of beneficial effects on kindergartners. My ultimate goal is for Arab children to grow up loving Arabic books and proud of their own language.

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