# Implementing phonics method in teaching Arabic and English reading and writing skills

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### Abstract

This study compared between the phonics teaching method used in teaching different languages which are Arabic and English. As each language has its own alphabetic, phonological, syntactic and semantic features, teaching them needs different methods according to the needs of the learners. However, the traditional way of teaching Arabic used through ages is the phonics method as it is the suitable method to teach languages that have consistent graph-phoneme correspondence, traditional teaching English methods did not focus on the phonics methods as a result of the inconsistency in graph-phoneme correspondence. In the Arabic and English version of the phonics method, the main element that

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teachers focus on is the phonemic awareness of the letters. As the learners will be able to blend and read sound and words as soon as they recognize the letter- sound connections. As a result of the consistency in the alphabetic-phonemic system, learners of Arabic can master reading and writing skills perfectly in no time unlike learners of English who struggle to recognize all types of pronunciations that one letter may have.

Key Words: phonics method, graph-phoneme, reading and writing skills.

### Introduction

Language is the means of communication used by human race to share knowledge, feeling, ideas. All languages mainly have the same use purpose which is conveying a certain message to be understood by the target people. According to UNESCO (2010), there are around 3000 spoken languages around the world. Each language has got its own features, characteristics which in a way or another differ from other languages. These differences can be in the alphabetic system, meaning system, grammar system or

pragmatic system. World languages are classified into groups and families that share a common ancestry. For instance, English language descends from Indo-European family and related to German and Dutch. The Indo-European family also includes the Romance languages like French, Spanish and Italian that descend from Latin (Burke, Susan E, 1998). English language has passed through different changes from Proto-English which is the English that has its roots in the languages of the Germanic tribes up to the English that people use today. Those changes happened in basically in grammar and phonology as English has borrowed many words from other languages (Dark, Ken, 2000). some examples of grammar changes in the table below (Thomas. 2002):

| | Case | Old English | Middle English | Modern English |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Nominative** | ić | I, ich, ik | I |
| **Singular** | **Accusative** | mē, mеć | me | me |
| | **Dative** | mē | | |

|  |  |  |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | **Genitive** | mīn | min, mi | my, mine |
| **Plural** | **Nominative** | wē | we | we |
|  | **Accusative** | ūs, ūsiċ | us | us |

The phonological changes that happened in overtime are illustrated in some examples in the following, showing the changes in their form over the last 2,000 years:

|  | **one** | **two** | **three** | **four** | **five** | **six** | **seven** | **mother** | **heart** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Proto-Germanic**, c. AD 1 | ainaz | twai | θriːz | feðwoːr | fimf | sehs | seβun | moːðeːr | hertoːː |
| **West Germanic**, c. AD 400 | ain | twai | θriju | fewwur | fimf | sehs | seβun | moːdar | herta |
| **Late Old English**, c. AD 900 | aːn | twaː | θreo | feowor | fiːf | siks | sĕðvon | moːdor | hĕŏrte |
| **(Late Old English spelling)** | *(ān)* | *(twā)* | *(þrēo)* | *(fēowor)* | *(fīf)* | *(six)* | *(seofon)* | *(mōdor)* | *(heorte)* |

| | one | two | three | four | five | six | seven | mother | heart |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Late Middle English**, c. 1350 | ɔːn | two: | θreː | fowər | fiːvə | siks | sevən | moːðər | hertə |
| **(Late Middle English spelling)** | *(oon)* | *(two)* | *(three)* | *(fower)* | *(five)* | *(six)* | *(seven)* | *(mother)* | *(herte)* |
| **Early Modern English**, c. 1600 | oːn > ! wʊn | twuː > tuː | θriː | foːr | fəiv | siks | sevən | mʊðər | hert |
| **Modern English**, c. 2000 | wʌn | tuː | θriː | fɔː(r) | faiv | sɪks | sevən | mʌðə(r) | hɑrt/hɑːt |
| | **one** | **two** | **three** | **four** | **five** | **six** | **seven** | **mother** | **heart** |

       On the other hand, Arabic language descend from Central-

Semitic language. Arabic is a diaglossic language that has many

spoken forms which are used in different countries around the Arab

world. These colloquial spoken forms; however, they differ

phonologically, syntactically and lexically from the standard Arabic,

originated from the standard Arabic which can be found in the Holy

Quraan (Al-Jarf, 2007). The Standard Arabic is the language used in

education institutes, newspapers, magazines and television programs.

As it is the language of Holy Quran, it has never passed through any

changes overtime. As mentioned in The Holy Quran (Surat Alhijr,

Verse no:9) " *Indeed, it is We who sent down the Qur'an and indeed, We will be its guardian(from corruption)"*. The most standard form of Arabic language is the form of Holy Quran that has never and will never change, standard Arabic will remain the same forever.

The main feature of Arabic is the consistent graph-phonological connection. That is to say, the letter-sound correspondence is consistent which means the way it is read, it is written. In other words, words have as many number of pronounced phonemes as the number of the written letter. However, children, from birth to school age, are exposed to the standard form of Arabic in some television cartoons or programs and to the colloquial language from parents and surroundings, they do not struggle in mastering it (Al-Jarf, 2007).

### The English alphabetic system

The modern English alphabet system is a Latin alphabet that consist of 26 letters including 21 consonant letters and 5 vowel letters. Each letter in spelled in two different ways or have two different forms called the

capital form and the small form. These letters represent 44 sounds which called phonemes. These English phonemes are classified into two groups which are consonant sounds and vowel sounds including 24 consonants and 20 vowels.

Passing through the history of the British lands shows that great Britain suffered of several waves of invasions physically and intellectually(Black and Macraild 2003).   Britain has not only been defeated many times including the time of Anglo-Saxon invasion which had a great influence on the language, but also it has colonized many lands. Moreover, Britain has been the escape to many European immigrants for a long time (Mallory, 1989). Consequently, these factors influenced English language and it was subjected to several changes. Calfee and Drum (1986) claimed that there was never an organization made to protect the linguistic purity of the language. The changes influenced the phonological, writing and grammatical systems. As a result of these changes, English writing system is considered as one of the deepest orthographies knows as a quasi-regular orthography (as cited in Coyne, 2012). This rose a great number of letter-sound  relations inconsistency which makes using reading methods to teach English more

complex and difficult than teaching other alphabetic languages where graph-phoneme correspondences consistent (Vaughn et al 2006).

In modern English, learners may get confused when they come through grapheme represents two different phonemes such as "c" which represents /s/ and /k/ which make it difficult for a learner to recognize and decide which one should be used in unfamiliar words. Moreover, one phoneme may also represent more than one letter, for example, /i:/ might be represented by 'e' as in "we" , "ea" as in " steam" or "ee" as in "see". These inconsistencies made teaching reading in English more difficult and gave the chance to many theories, educational philosophies and teaching approaches to rise. Those different teaching methods of teaching reading have considered many factors including the theories of second language acquisition, the nature of learning reading and the psycholinguists views including Goodman.

**The Arabic alphabetic system**

Arabic language is the lingua franca of all the nations in the Arab world which consists of twenty two nations in both continents middle east and north Africa. Arabic language has the same writing symbols of Persian language and Urdu with same writing direction ( from right to

left) but with different sounds. Arabic language has a different alphabet system from English. It has 28 letters including consonants and long vowels as well as 14 symbols that function as short vowels and pronunciation markers or markers for grammatical purposes (Almontaser, 2007).

Al-Jarf (2007) represented the Arabic writing system as the system that has 28 letters divided into 25 consonant and 3 long vowel letters, in addition to 12 diacritical marks including three short vowels. Each consonant letter can be pronounced in four different ways.to make words, letters are attached together with diacritics to make it easier for young learners to read. The diacritics are placed either upon the letter or underneath  according to the sound needed to be pronounced. However, words written in newspapers, magazines, and books are written without diacritics marks which are read by advanced readers, young children cannot read words without diacritics marks as they are not used to read unfamiliar words. Thus, teachers use diacritics marks to help children decoding words until they master word-recognition (Al-Jarf, 2007). The consistence graph-phoneme connection is what makes learning to read Arabic language easier than learning to read other languages in which the

letter-sound relation is inconsistent. That also helps learners to learn writing as long as they recognize letters and sounds ( if one can read, s/he can write).

Almontaser (2007), illustrated the Arabic orthography which can be distinguished from European counterparts through three main features. The direction of Arabic writing system is right to left which contrary to the European version from left to right. Arabic graphs are connected in print and script whereas English alphabet are only connected in scripts. Also, in Arabic orthography, letters have different shapes according to the their place in the word ( initial, middle or final position).he also summarized the principles that teachers should consider while teaching Arabic in five points :

- Arabic is one language but it has many varieties used all around the Arab world.

- All learners can produce Arabic phonemes accurately, and it is necessary to motivate and to expect accuracy from the beginning.

- It is essential to set high expectations while maintaining and encouraging cooperative environment in class by rewarding success verbally and often.

- Vocabulary is mainly the basis of all  Arabic skills.

- The numerous varieties and dialects of Arabic constitute a richness to be embraced, not dreaded.

**Reading approaches**

Reading approaches are the teaching methods which mainly focus on teaching reading skill. Reading approach advocates do believe that reading skill should be learnt naturally the same way speaking skill is acquired. The nature feature of learning reading is what makes Goodman believed in Chomsky theories of natural recognition of the written words and he described reading as  "Reading: A psycholinguistic guessing game" Goodman, Kenneth S. (1967). Neither Goodman and psychologists were inspired the theories of Chomsky that he usually use biological evidences to prove his theories, nor Chomsky have ever accepted Goodman's assumptions, Liberman, Mark (2007). These assumption were mainly the factors behind the rise of many teaching reading approaches. Here are some definitions of the most widely used teaching reading approaches:

**Alphabetic approach**: it is a traditional method make use of synthetic strategies to teach reading and writing skills. Teachers, using this method, focus on teaching letters by their names until learners recognize the whole set of a language alphabet. Then, learners are required to spell words made of one or two syllables up to eight syllables as they master spelling techniques. This method is in use since ancient times up to early 19th century.

**Linguistic approach**: this term is usually used to describe teaching methods used in classes when the curriculum is taught in the mother tongue of the learners. It can be defined as a teaching method that assumes learners in the class who participate orally have strong understanding of their mother tongue (oral language) which is then used as an associative learning tool for words and spelling patterns (N., Pam M.S. 2013). This method emphasizes the words and word families and it neglects the relationship between prints and scripts.

**Phonics method:** It can be defined as a teaching approach used to teach early stage learners writing and reading skills. The primary focus of this method is developing the phonemic awareness of the written

symbols. That is to improve the ability to hear recognize and manipulate the relationships between the most important elements of a language prints and scripts. Therefore, it is used to teach the connection between the phonemes and the spelling patterns. The main objective of using phonics method is to enable children to decode written letters by reading them out and blend those sounds to read a full set of letters that give a meaning (McGuinness, Diane2004).

There are five main types of phonics: analogy phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, phonics through spelling and synthetic phonics.

- **analogy phonics:** it is a phonics strategy in which children are asked to use parts of words (onsets or rimes) that they have already learned before to read and decode unfamiliar words. In other words, children will learn the unfamiliar words by recognizing the similarities of the onsets or rimes of the familiar words that they have learned( e.g. fan, man, can).

- **analytic phonics:** in this phonics strategy, children are involved in analyzing the connections between letters and sounds in the

vocabulary that they have already learned. They will need to recognize the similarities in a set of words, and find out the common sounds. this strategy is also known as implicit phonics (e.g. car, cat, camera, the common phoneme which all words have is /k/).

- **embedded phonics:** this phonics strategy is a very implicit approach which is similar to whole-language approach in which the main unit of teaching is the word not the phoneme. In this method, children are allowed to read authentic texts of their interest in which limited number of phonemes and letters are taught in reading sessions. The primary focus in this method is grasping meaning out of a reading text and little attention is given to phonemes.

- **phonics through spelling:**  teachers usually use this strategy of phonics in order to raise the phonemic awareness among children. Teachers teach children how to divide words into phonemes and match them to the letters representing them. Gradually, they will improve their spelling skill as well as enhancing an accurate pronunciation skill.

- **Synthetic phonics:** it is an effective phonics strategy to teach children reading by synthesizing words from individual sounds.

children learn to blend letters and sounds together to make meaningful words (oral or written words). "That systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in kindergarten through 6th grade and for children having difficulty learning to read" (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, p. 9). Therefore, it teaches children to  recognize a grapheme (written symbol) and convert it to a phoneme (sound) and blend them together to make a meaningful word. This strategy develops both writing and reading skills together.

- **Whole word method:** it is a reading approach in which the primary concern is given to word recognition rather than graphemes, phonemes or morphemes. In this method words are the main instructional unit. Learning word analysis is a stage comes after word recognition. This, therefore, is considered as a meaning-oriented method.

- **Language Experience/Whole Language Approach:** It focuses on having learners learn reading naturally. It encourages learners to use speaking as "content" of reading. It also has learners use "oral language" as a foundation for "spelling instruction". Students learn

by "reading and re-reading", by applying shared reading and group reading strategies.

- **Reading Comprehension:** It teaches the explicit techniques of how to gain the meaning of the text (hisplaceforhelpinschool.com, 2011).

**Discussion and conclusion**

However, Arabic and English are two different languages in terms of orthography, phonology, syntax and semantics; teachers of the two languages use similar methods of teaching both languages.

Arabic language used to be taught for religious purposes as it is the language of The Holy Quran. The Holy Quran is the Book that most children start learning to read since early age. Considering the fact that all countries in which Arabic is the lingua franca are Muslim countries, Arabic are taught as soon as the child is four years old. In the religious classes known as (Ktateeb or Zawaya), teachers of Arabic focus on teaching graphemes ( the letters represented by a sounds) and morphemes ( the sounds represented by letters). As Arabic has got a consistent print-script correspondence, it is expected that children master grapheme-phoneme recognition in a very short time. Teachers usually present the

different shapes of letters as soon as the children recognize the letter-sound relationships. Each Arabic letter has three different shapes according to its position in a word whether it is an initial letter, middle letter or final letter. As soon as children master this perfectly, they will be able to read and write accurately.

The Arabic phonics version of teaching reading through phonics method shows that the minimum instructional units are the graphemes and the morphemes. This is because of the consistent orthographic-phonological system of Arabic language which makes reading Arabic is an easy skill to be developed. Some scholars explained that teaching Arabic needs a qualified teacher who believes of what he is doing; including Benlab (2006), who stated that " the more the teachers show they believe that students can learn Arabic, the less the students feel that Arabic is difficult, and vice versa".

On the other hand, teaching English through phonics methods has been a controversial issue for a long time. Many researchers has advocated the assumption that reading skill is like speaking skill can be developed naturally. Both phonics instruction method and whole language approach

advocates have agreed with that but each one of them follows a different theory of language learning. Jon Reyhner (2008) has described this controversial issue as the "reading war". He stated that the phonics instruction method basically relies on the theory of behavioral learning (behaviorism) of B.F. Skinner whereas the whole language approach is constructed on the assumptions of constructivist learning theory. These two theories have different perspectives towards learning which are explained in the next table:

| Phonics instruction (behaviorism theory) | Whole language ( constructive theory) |
|---|---|
| Teacher-centered approach | Student centered approach |
| Grapheme-morpheme emphasis | Whole language emphasis |
| Phoneme is the smallest unit | Word is the smallest unit |
| Graph-phoneme method | Meaning oriented method |
| Reading and writing skills development | Focus on read and neglects writing |

Some whole-language approach advocates claimed that there is no scientific evidence proved that children who get high grades of reading skill as fluent readers can get the same grades in reading comprehension

(Allington, 2002). In other words, they assume that phonics neglect the meaning of the words and the main ideas of the text while it only focuses on grapheme recognition and improving the blending strategies. This was as an answer to National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance; the national assessment of educational progress (1992-2005) which showed the grades achieved by learners who have been taught by phonics methods are better than those who have been taught by other methods (NCEERA, 2008).

While some psychologists believe that meaning comes first, linguists do believe that children need to learn how to read first and meaning comes in a later stage. However, the fact that both advocates that children should learn and develop reading skill in an early age, they encounter challenges in the inconsistent graph-morpheme system. This inconsistent system made curriculum designers to teach easy morphemes first and in a later stage they start teaching tricky words and difficult morphemes. One of the most famous used curriculum is well known as Jolly Phonics in which the morphemes and graphemes are classified into seven groups from simple sets to more complex ones.

Eventually, teaching reading methods are, nowadays, used all around the world as a teaching method to different languages regardless the different features and characteristics. The main principle of adopting phonics methods in teaching reading is the children need to develop this skill to be able to come through different sciences and also to improve the reading and writing skills.

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