Learning From Abdallah: A Case Study of an Arabic-Speaking Child in a U.S. School

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The Arabic language has features very different from English, presenting challenges for teachers faced with Arabic-speaking students. This article describes some ways to help Arabic speakers learn English successfully.

Sara Chang is an experienced English as a second language teacher in an elementary school in Leon County, Florida. Her classroom is rich with print that scaffolds English-language learners (ELLs) as they begin to master the vocabulary, grammar, and peculiarities of the English language. For example, the classroom walls are filled with posters, pocket charts, games, and books designed to support children who are learning English. Sara is dedicated to the idea that all children can, and should, learn in her classroom. Although this was the environment into which Abdallah (pseudonym) entered, he struggled academically. Sara realized that she had little knowledge of Abdallah’s first language, Arabic, and had few resources to offer him in his native language. Her observations of Abdallah revealed that he seemed to know little about reading in his native language, had little information about English, and was making almost no progress in acquiring reading knowledge of either language. Accepting the reality that she needed to build her own background to properly scaffold Abdallah, Sara chose to seek assistance from educators with experience in teaching youngsters whose first language is Arabic.

Abdallah, a 9-year-old Palestinian student, came to the authors’ attention when Sara, a recently graduated Master’s student from the local university, asked a former professor for assistance with Abdallah’s reading assessment. Sara’s first impression was that Abdallah was lagging behind in both Arabic and English, but she needed a more accurate assessment of his reading in both languages, as well as ideas for instruction.

Abdallah is one member of a growing population of Arabic-speaking children who are entering U.S. public schools. Census 2000 data (United States Census Bureau, 2003) counted 1.2 million U.S. residents who reported Arab ancestry, representing an increase in the Arab population of the United States of nearly 40% during the 1990s. This population includes many students like Abdallah, who must acquire enough facility with the English language to meet the academic requirements of their new country. Many of the educational accommodations that are in place to serve all ELLs also serve this new wave of children from Arabic-speaking nations. Yet issues and questions that are specific to Abdallah and others like him, but shared with many similar ELLs, arise as schools strive to scaffold these students’ transition into the English-speaking world of U.S. education. As the work with Abdallah began, the following questions came under consideration:

1. What is Abdallah’s current status as a reader of Arabic and of English?
2. What characteristics of the Arabic language appear to be affecting Abdallah’s transition to English?
3. Given Abdallah’s current status as a reader and writer as identified in question 1 and the characteristics of Arabic as noted in question 2, what instructional strategies will be most effective with Abdallah?

With the process of responding to Sara’s request for assistance came an opportunity to learn from Abdallah.
What Is Abdallah’s Current Status as a Reader of Arabic and of English?

Sara provided background information on Abdallah as well as classroom observations of his English literacy performance. Abdallah had attended grades K–3 in Palestine. During that time, Abdallah lived with his family in a border region of Palestine and Israel; his reported memories of this period reflect the nature of war. He had been enrolled in Sara’s ELL program as a fourth grader from September 2004 until May 2005. Sara taught Abdallah for two hours daily during reading block time, which focused on reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Sara’s class contains students who speak many different languages. A regular classroom teacher was responsible for teaching Abdallah the other subject areas of math, science, and social studies; during this time he was with monolingual English-speaking children. The school, however, is designated as an ELL center for the city, and all classroom teachers have been trained to use sheltering strategies such as the Rosetta Stone technique. This technique is based on the model of the ancient Rosetta Stone that contains the same text in Egyptian hieroglyphics, Egyptian demotic script, and several ancient Greek languages. Using this model, the teacher makes a chart of everyday English words in one column. Students who speak languages other than English contribute equivalent words from their own languages in the successive columns (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 1998).

Even with this instruction in sheltered classrooms, Abdallah was making minimal progress in his acquisition of English. Sara became particularly concerned when two more Arabic-speaking children of similar age, a brother (third grade) and sister (fourth grade), were transferred into the program in January. The brother and sister had been attending school in Jordan and were making much more rapid progress in English reading than was Abdallah.

Sara observed that Abdallah could read and write some words in Arabic; however, his Arabic oral reading was dysfluent. Many Arabic-speaking nations, including Palestine, encourage the study of English. Abdallah had attended an English class once a week while in Palestine. Even though he could proudly recite all of his English letters, Abdallah still had difficulty decoding English words with three or four phonemes, such as boat or glide. His English spelling was very poor; and, on a statewide writing test, he could generate only five English sentences within an hour. His English spelling was in the semiphonetic phase (spelling is syllabic, beginning consonants are represented, and vowels are omitted; Gentry, 1982). Even this spelling, for Abdallah, was slow and laborious.

In the local school district, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) test (2002) is commonly used as one measure for assessing oral reading fluency. To provide a basis for comparison of Abdallah’s English against his Arabic reading fluency, Sara administered the second-grade DIBELS to Abdallah. On this measure, Abdallah did well on phoneme segmentation fluency. On nonsense-word fluency, he was unable to pronounce short vowels, consistently substituting long vowels. To provide a basis for monitoring growth, Abdallah was then given two second-grade oral reading fluency (ORF) passages to read. Abdallah read 15 correct words per minute (CWPM) when reading English text orally at the second-grade level. He answered incorrectly on more than half of the comprehension questions that followed the passage.

To assess Abdallah as a reader and writer of Arabic, the assistance of a bilingual Arabic- and English-speaking mentor/tutor, Fathi El-Ashry (second author), was enlisted. Fathi began his assessment by interviewing Abdallah’s parents. This approach is supported by Ariza’s (2006) advice that “helping families cope with varying levels of acculturation, language differences, and conformity to tradition can enable students to develop a positive identity that is both personally satisfying and respectful of their heritage” (pp. 62–63). Fathi noted that, although Abdallah and his family appear to be satisfied with their new life in the United States where they reported feeling safe, they did miss their homeland. The parents offered that the language difference has been a concern for the entire family. With regard to their expectations for the tutoring sessions, the parents stated that they wanted Abdallah to gain facility in English for academic purposes and for the social environment in which he was now living; concomitantly, they did not want him to lose his Arabic language for use within his own culture and religion. They agreed to have Abdallah meet weekly with the tutor after school.

As Fathi began the formal assessment of Abdallah, he noted that Abdallah had not read much Arabic text...
during the prior eight months. As Abdallah read aloud from a second-grade Arabic reading passage entitled “The Bee Is a Beneficial Insect,” he gave the singular form of words that should have been plural 2 out of 4 times (in Arabic, the plural is sometimes indicated in the middle of a word rather than at the end, see Table 1). Abdallah recognized, but did not apply, diacritical marks; these marks are essential for both sound and meaning. He was an attentive decoder and could read many words correctly after intense concentration. His

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Orthography</strong></td>
<td><strong>Orthography</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Letter forms remain the same regardless of placement in the word.</td>
<td>Letter forms take on a different shape based on placement in the word—initial, medial, or end.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Each letter has a distinctive shape.</td>
<td>Many letters are similarly shaped.</td>
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<td>3. Many phonemes are represented by multiletter graphemes.</td>
<td>One letter equals one phoneme.</td>
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<td>4. It has unpredictable phoneme–grapheme patterns—deep orthography.</td>
<td>It has predictable phoneme–grapheme correspondence when vowels are present—shallow orthography. When vowels are not attached to letters, Arabic is considered to have a deep orthography.</td>
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<td>5. Vowelling system remains constant from childhood to adulthood.</td>
<td>Short vowels are present in works written for children, the Qur’an, and poetry; however, short vowels are omitted in all other works intended for adult audiences.</td>
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<td>6. Vowels are letters of the alphabet. One vowel letter, however, represents multiple vowel phonemes.</td>
<td>Short vowels are diacritical marks attached to consonants; for this reason, some linguists consider Arabic to be a syllabic rather than an alphabetic language. Long vowels are expressed in Arabic by using letters; however, each letter represents a single long vowel phoneme.</td>
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<td>7. It contains many heterographic homophones (same pronunciation, different spelling, and different meaning) such as sale and sail.</td>
<td>When vowels are present, there are no homophones in Arabic. When vowels are omitted, some words with different meanings are spelled identically.</td>
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<td>8. Though bound and free morphemes are present in English, the system is much simpler than the Arabic morphological system. Infixed are not present.</td>
<td>Three and four combinations are converted to hundreds of variations on the root by complex use of morphemes through a pervasive use of derivations including tense, gender, person, and number, as well as meaning. Infixed are numerous. This is termed the trilateral/quadrilateral-root model.</td>
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**Concepts of print**

1. Although English includes dialects and the concept of standard and nonstandard English, the variation between dialects is minimal. All Arabic countries have two forms of Arabic: formal (FusHa), also called Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and colloquial (Aamiyya), also called Non-Standard Arabic (NSA). Furthermore, NSA varies from nation to nation. NSA can also vary within the same country by geographic regions. |
| 2. It is written from left to right. | It is written from right to left. |

**Syntax**

1. All sentences contain a verb. Noun sentences do not contain a verb (e.g., God great). |
| 2. Contains verbs for to be and to have. | It has no verbs for to have and to be. |
| 3. Tenses of regular verbs are indicated by suffixes or by helping verbs. | Tenses are indicated by the addition of suffixes to a single root. |
| 4. It has articles a, an, and the. | It has one article, al- (close in meaning to the), but no articles similar to a or an. |
reading required a high degree of phonological mediation. Abdallah did not consistently pronounce important Arabic onsets. For instance, the al- in al-nahl (the bee) was recognized once and ignored, though present, in the same word later in the text. Abdallah’s oral reading in Arabic was dysfluent; he typically ignored Arabic noun inflections. In Arabic, these inflections denote gender, number, or meaning, so they are necessary for reading comprehension. Fathi further observed that Abdallah often read from memory, ignoring the text altogether. He ignored punctuation and had more difficulty decoding short two-letter words than he had with longer, more complex words.

On another passage, entitled “Thank You,” two additional observations were made. When asked by the mentor to read after him (echo read), Abdallah read fluently. Abdallah’s oral reading comprehension, as measured by direct questioning, was high. Four out of five questions were answered correctly, with no prompting. This was noted as a difference between Abdallah’s reading comprehension in Arabic (L1) and his reading comprehension in English (L2).

Finally, Fathi translated into Arabic and administered the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, third edition (PPVT-III) to Abdallah. The PPVT-III is a norm-referenced, individually administered measure of receptive vocabulary. This assessment was modified, through translation, to determine the extent of Abdallah’s receptive Arabic vocabulary. Although the instrument is normed for speakers of English, Washington and Craig (1999) found the PPVT-III to be a culturally fair test of receptive vocabulary knowledge. Through the use of this instrument, Fathi was able to observe that Abdallah had a rich Arabic receptive vocabulary. On the charts provided by the test developers for speakers of English, Abdallah obtained a raw score of 124, placing him in the 96th percentile, stanine 9, with an age-equivalent score of 12.9.

Several theoretical observations, gleaned from these assessments, provided a basis for designing an instructional plan for Abdallah.

1. Abdallah’s high performance in listening vocabulary (auding) on the Arabic-translated PPVT-III indicated that factors such as basic world knowledge, a literacy-poor home environment, or a language disability were probably not significant contributors to his lagging reading development.

2. Abdallah had not developed sufficient reading skills in Arabic (L1) to provide a strong basis for making transfers to reading in his new language, English (L2). One idea to be explored was that the political unrest of Palestine, as opposed to the more peaceful environment of Jordan, the homeland of his new classmates, was a contributing factor to the relative ease with which the brother and sister had acquired a solid base in Arabic and the subsequent ease with which they were acquiring English.

3. It also appeared that factors from Abdallah’s limited knowledge of Arabic were confounding his acquisition of English (observed in his vowel confusion and his use of phonetic, rather than visual, cues for spelling and decoding). The Arabic language is considered to have a “shallow orthographic structure” (regular sound–letter correspondences) as opposed to English, which has a “deep orthographic structure” (many irregular sound–letter correspondences). Abu-Rabia and Siegel (2002) found that “bilingual English Arabic children who had reading problems in English had higher scores on English pseudo-word reading and spelling tasks than monolingual English-speaking children with reading disabilities, probably because of positive transfer from the regular nature of Arabic orthography” (p. 661). However, Grabe (1991) found that this linguistic difference might cause difficulty for some nonnative readers of English. Wade-Woolley (1999) and Paulesu et al. (2001) later substantiated this finding. Thus, one observation that needed to be verified was the idea that Abdallah might expect his new language to display the regular sound–letter correspondences of his native language.

4. Abdallah had strength in comprehension strategies in Arabic reading when the text was somewhat accessible; strength in oral vocabulary in Arabic, but not in English; and weaknesses in both languages in word-recognition strategies and fluency.

What Characteristics of the Arabic Language Appear to Be Affecting Abdallah’s Transition to English?

Cummins (1981) first presented the idea that strength in the native language is essential for second-language learners and that the knowledge and skills that are learned in the native tongue provide the basis for a positive transfer of skills. He termed this theory Common
Underlying Proficiency (CUP). Within the framework of his theory, Cummins assumed that certain metalinguistic generalizations underlie the process of reading acquisition for all languages. Temple, Ogle, Crawford, and Freppon (2005) found that children learn to read and write only once, transferring skills learned in their first language to their new second language. As Bialystok (2001) pointed out, children who are exposed to more than one language at an early age display a heightened awareness of the arbitrary phonological and grammatical characteristics of language. This phenomenon is termed metalinguistic advantage. Interestingly enough, this metalinguistic advantage appears to hold even when languages that the child learns are radically different, as is the case with Arabic and English (Bialystok, 1997).

English is an Indo-European language and Arabic is a Semitic language. The two languages share some commonalities. These commonalities are termed positive transfers. In other words, the ELL learns to apply the same knowledge and strategies to the new language (L2) that had been acquired for the native language (L1). Arabic and English share some positive transfers. These positive transfers include the fact that, although the alphabets are different, both languages are alphabetic systems based on phoneme-grapheme correspondences. Furthermore, both languages express verb tenses. However, the differences (negative transfers) between the two languages are complex and extensive. Some of the major negative transfers are presented in Table 1.

Two characteristics of Arabic-speaking nations mentioned in Table 1 have concerned linguists and educators for some time. The first concern is that Arabic-speaking nations are diglossic; that is, the spoken dialect is vastly different from the written academic form of the language. Children, therefore, develop a receptive vocabulary that is different from the vocabulary they are exposed to as they begin decoding print. Most Arabic-speaking children begin school with limited knowledge about literacy practices related to literary Arabic. The second concern is that Arabic text retains diacritical marks to indicate vowels until the children are considered to be readers (usually around the sixth grade). At that time, the vowel diacritical marks are dropped from all texts intended for an adult audience (except for the Muslim holy book, the Qur’an, and for classical poetry). Arabic-speaking children, then, pass through three forms of their language on their way to becoming proficient readers of Arabic. First, they acquire the spoken vocabulary of the colloquial dialect of their country, Non-Standard Arabic (NSA). Next, they learn to decode the print of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) when they attend school. Finally, they learn to understand the print when the vowel diacritical marks are eliminated. Interestingly, Eviatar and Ibrahim (2000) found that exposure to multiple forms of the same language (NSA, MSA, and non-vowelled text) provide Arabic-speaking students with the same metalinguistic advantage that has been identified by Bialystok (1997, 2001) in bilingual children.

Though we cannot expect ELL teachers to know all of the characteristics of all the languages of their students, some knowledge of the positive and negative transfers between the languages can contribute to efficient instruction. This comparison between languages is termed contrastive analysis. The classroom teacher can use contrastive analysis in two ways. First, a knowledge of basic differences between the two languages (in this case, English and Arabic) can assist the teacher in designing direct instruction that scaffolds the student’s recognition of positive and negative transfers from L1 to L2. For instance, the knowledge that Arabic letters change form according to place in the word might prompt the teacher to explicitly teach the consistency of English letters regardless of within-word placement. Second, contrastive analysis can be used as an assessment tool through a process called error analysis. For instance, the Arabic-speaking child might consistently omit articles from his English writing. The teacher can attribute this type of error to a negative transfer from the learner’s native language and plan accordingly for instruction.

Garcia (2004) stated “bilingualism is not the arithmetic sum of two languages” (p. 243); many sociocultural influences are of equal importance for students such as Abdallah. According to sociocultural theory,
social experience and thought are a single entity; reality is constructed as it is lived. Put simply, children learn the language that is valued by the culture. This cultural language is the embodiment of the values, functions, and representations of the society in which the child lives (Garcia, 2004; Hamers, & Blanc, 1989). As with most ELLs, many sociocultural features differ from those of their English-speaking peers. Some examples of these features include religious and patriotic celebrations, sports events, sex education, and gender roles and practices.

Finally, Arabic-speaking nations have an unusually strong tradition of oral language. According to Abu-Rabia, Share, and Mansour (2003), “oral skills have long been, and are still considered, essential in transmitting culture from one generation to another” (p. 438). Ariza (2006) pointed out that “writing is always a reflection of a language and culture, and Arabic and Arabic speakers are expressive, poetic, and indirect” (p. 62). Educators should learn about and be sensitive to these cultural anomalies, for, as Garcia (2004) stated, “if the culture of the classroom negates the child’s first language and accompanying representations of the child’s world, it is thus negating the tools the child has to construct a basic cognitive framework” (p. 254). Although the work of Abu-Rabia et al. and Ariza indicated that oral language, oral reading, and recitation are common practices in Arabic-speaking nations, research needs to be conducted to determine whether instruction that focuses on these practices would be more efficient for Arabic-speaking ELLs.

What Instructional Strategies Will Be Most Effective for Abdallah?

Given this knowledge of the Arabic language and the importance of a supportive cultural environment, and considering the observations collected from the assessment of Abdallah, an instructional plan that included the following objectives was established.

1. Strengthen Abdallah’s Arabic reading strategies for word recognition and fluency
2. Place Abdallah’s instruction within a familiar cultural environment
3. Provide scaffolding for Abdallah to identify and strengthen positive and mitigate negative transfers from Arabic to English

To address Abdallah’s sociocultural needs, the continued help of Fathi, the Arabic-speaking teacher/mentor, was enlisted, and Abdallah’s cousin Marwan (pseudonym) happily volunteered to participate in the tutoring sessions.

The initial phase of Abdallah’s instruction was scheduled for four months. During this period, Abdallah met weekly with Fathi for sessions that lasted up to an hour and a half. The objective of this instructional phase was to strengthen Abdallah’s Arabic reading. The assessment process had revealed that word recognition and fluency should be targeted. The sessions were developed based on the model recommended by Walker (2000) and included the following four components, all in Arabic.

1. Continuous Diagnostic Assessment (CDA). This component is an assessment of retention for material mastered in the previous session. It included a rereading of the previously learned text, with a check of word-recognition accuracy and an informal observation of improved fluency.
2. Guided Reading (GR). This component included teacher-scaffolded reading of new material. The material was selected for Abdallah’s instructional level. Initially, this material was at the second-grade level, taken from Arabic school texts. After four months, Abdallah was successfully accessing Arabic text at the fourth-grade level. GR often included paired reading, as recommended by Drucker (2003). Marwan, who is more skilled in Arabic reading than Abdallah, would read the text aloud while Abdallah read along. Then Abdallah would reread the same text aloud. Teacher scaffolding during the GR component included the modeling of metacognitive, word recognition, and comprehension strategies.

3. Skills and Strategies (SS). This component included direct instruction in skills and strategies as needed. For instance, direct instruction in the Arabic diacritical vowel system was included in this component.

4. Elaborations and Extensions (EE). This component included activities designed to increase Abdallah’s enjoyment of language and to directly encourage the expansion of reading and writing behaviors beyond the tutoring environment.

A typical reading session with Abdallah and Fathi is illustrated by the following examples. A
reading inventory revealed that Abdallah had an interest in birds and animals, so a text entitled “The Group of Animals and Birds” was chosen from an Arabic second-grade reader. A CDA was performed to ensure that this text fell within Abdallah’s instructional level. The assessment was followed by direct vocabulary instruction based on Abdallah’s mis cues. Abdallah was also given an opportunity to read the passage silently in preparation for an oral partner reading with his cousin, Marwan. Following the partner reading, Marwan and Abdallah performed a peer evaluation, identifying the pieces of the text that were read fluently and comprehended. Fathi made a note of Abdallah’s continuing difficulty with Arabic diacritical marks and the need to provide direct instruction and practice on the Arabic system of vowels.

At this point, Fathi noticed a difficulty that the students were having with understanding and acquiring Arabic print vocabulary. The students inquired about the words katia (a group of animals) and serb (a group of birds). Neither of these terms is present in the Arabic spoken dialect. Fathi paused to directly teach the meaning of these terms. Throughout the sessions, Abdallah often interrupted the reading to inquire about the meaning of specific words. Most of these words came from the literary Arabic (MSA) and were not used in daily speech (NSA).

Arabic has an extremely strong morphological system (see Table 1). Many words from the literary Arabic share morphemes with the dialectical Arabic. These words exist on the borders between the two forms of the Arabic language. It has been hypothesized that Arabic readers rely heavily on morphological knowledge as well as phonological knowledge. Shimron (1993) attributed this parallel reliance on morphological and phonological knowledge to an interactive model of reading that assumes processing of information from multiple sources of information. Fathi made a note to scaffold Abdallah in knowledge of shared morphemes between the two forms of the Arabic language.

For the next part of the tutoring session, Fathi followed the secular text with a reading from the Qur’an about God’s creation of everything on earth, including birds, animals, and human beings. The reading of the Qur’an provided Abdallah with practice in the use of the diacritical marks that may affect the meaning of some words. An oral recitation of the Qur’an requires accurate pronunciation. For this reason, the Qur’an is one of a few texts that retain all diacritical marks, usually lost in texts for Arabic adult readers. Fathi used the traditional strategy of asking the youngsters to read after him “in recitation” (a strategy similar to echo reading). Abdallah improved considerably on the text following the recitation.

During the SS portion of the lesson, Fathi asked Marwan and Abdallah to find Arabic words that are opposite in meaning. Finally, to extend and elaborate on the day’s learning, they were allowed to use the chalkboard to write words and sentences. They enjoyed this activity and did it with enthusiasm. For the next session, they were requested to bring in additional material about birds and animals, either from home or the library. With that, the session was over.

Several factors contributed to the efficacy of these lessons.

1. Text material for Guided Reading was carefully chosen to match Abdallah’s interests and instructional reading level.
2. Assessment was authentic, ongoing, and permeated all parts of the lesson. Instruction was immediately modified in response to observations.
3. Deference was shown to Abdallah’s sociocultural background through the inclusion of the Qur’an and the traditional methodology used to present it.

Following four months of individual tutoring, Abdallah had progressed to the fourth-grade level in Arabic reading. At this time, direct instruction in Arabic–English positive and negative transfers was introduced into the SS portion of the sessions, thus beginning the second phase of the instructional plan, projected to last an additional four months.

The following transfers from Table 1 were identified as concepts to be directly taught.

1. Knowledge of the unpredictable graphemic patterns of English spelling as opposed to the predictable Arabic patterns
2. Knowledge of English homophones
3. Recognition that every English sentence contains a verb
4. Knowledge of the English verbs to be and to have and their many uses
5. Recognition of the differences between the Arabic and English morphological systems
While Abdallah was receiving individual instruction from Fathi, he transferred to a new school. Abdallah’s new teacher provided ongoing instruction in English vocabulary, the use of an Arabic–English dictionary, and guided reading and writing experiences in English. Also, Abdallah’s English instruction was supplemented with Arabic texts. If this instruction had not been provided for Abdallah, a third phase, designed to increasingly expose him to English, would have been implemented within the tutoring sessions.

After eight months of individual tutoring, Fathi assessed Abdallah’s progress in English. Given Abdallah’s deficiency in oral fluency at the onset of the intervention, Fathi administered new passages from the DIBELS test (2002) for reading fluency in English. Across three previously unrehearsed English passages (second-grade level), Abdallah was able to read an average of 42 words correct per minute (an increase of 27 CWPM). Fathi noted that Abdallah’s accent, when reading English orally, was more closely approximating the oral language of English-speaking children.

Abdallah was then asked to write about anything he would like; he generated the English written passage as seen in Figure 1. When asked to read his writing aloud, Abdallah responded, “What is brown, green, and small, can you guess? OK, brown is my cat’s color and green is my cat’s eye color. That is the answer of the question.” Several observations can be made from this writing sample.

1. Abdallah has a firm grasp of English concepts of print, left to right directionality, possessive case, and some punctuation.

2. Abdallah is beginning to make sense of the deep orthography of English; for instance, he knows that the word question contains more letters than phonemes. Although he still does not spell the word conventionally, when his invented spelling of the word is read aloud, it approximates the English phonemes he is trying to represent.

3. The spelling of wath indicates that he is attending to the visual patterns of words, though he still has an unconventional spelling for a sight word.

4. He is representing the verb to be (absent in Arabic) in some sentences although it was still missing in the first sentence.

Once again, the PPVT-III was administered to Abdallah in Arabic translation. The posttest score on this measure (alternate form used) indicated that the tutoring had not affected Abdallah’s high initial score. At this point, the formal tutoring sessions were concluded.

**What Did We Learn From Abdallah?**

The work with Abdallah provided us with many answers, as well as with more questions. His moderate progress in English, following the reinforcement of his first language and direct instruction and practice in the transfers from L1 (Arabic) to L2 (English), appears to be consistent with Cummins’s (1979, 1981, 1986, 1989) Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) Theory. Abdallah profited academically from the relationship with his Arabic-speaking mentor/tutor. Because Abdallah and his tutor were both male, the role of gender is worthy of further investigation in the education of Arabic-speaking ELLs.

In the recognition that many teachers do not have access to Arabic-speaking tutors, teacher inservice should be designed to assist teachers in acquiring knowledge of contrastive analysis and its usefulness, the cultural anomalies inherent in other languages, and the instructional practices that are effective with children who speak that language. Arabic, like many other languages, is vastly different from the English language; and the positive and negative transfers are numerous and complex. It is unrealistic to expect teachers to acquire knowledge of all possible languages without the time, scaffolding, and opportunity to do so.
To further assist the teacher in strengthening the first language of the child, enlist the help of the student’s family. The parents can be encouraged to speak Arabic at home, to read aloud to their children in Arabic, and to provide Arabic reading material for the children. It might also be helpful to invite parents to sessions at which teachers share ideas for reading development at home and answer questions about the nature of reading instruction in the United States.

A lack of Arabic–English text for Arabic-speaking children in the United States was evident as Fathi searched for material to use with Abdallah. A conscious effort should be made to add collections of this type to libraries and to English for Speakers of Other Languages programs across the United States. By using such texts in their classrooms, teachers will gain a greater understanding of the culture of the children they teach. Children are eager to read and listen to stories that address topics and issues related to their culture and first language.

There are still many unanswered questions about the assessment of Arabic-speaking ELLs. How can the child’s knowledge of his or her first language be assessed? Can it be assumed that children who struggle in both languages have a language disability, or do other factors contribute to the child’s reading struggles? How should children like Abdallah—who have failed to learn to read in their first language and have passed the age at which they could have been expected to do so—be assessed? Tabbors and Snow (2001) emphasized that educators need “to have creative ways of assessing young bilingual children’s abilities.... Often, assessment, if it occurs at all, only occurs in English, providing no information about possible early literacy strengths that have been developed in the child’s first language” (p. 175). Assessment instruments and practices that provide us with a clear picture of bilingual children’s strengths and weaknesses are needed.

Many unanswered instructional questions also emerged from this work with Abdallah. How does the nature of the child’s first language affect his or her learning of a second language? When a child moves from one language to another, what affects his or her performance in the second language? What does the child carry with her or him to master the second language? What practices best scaffold positive and negative transfers between two languages? What are the cultural conditions that should be present in the classroom to support the English-language learner’s acquisition of literacy knowledge in both languages?

Finally, there is a need to address the sociopolitical conditions of the Arabic-speaking child’s homeland and the effects of these conditions on reading development. Although many Arabic-speaking children come to the United States from peaceful lands, many have also had their academic and personal lives disrupted by war. What has been learned from recent history about the educational implications of war for school-aged children around the globe? For instance, by looking back carefully at the educational integration of the children of South Vietnam following the fall of that country, can lessons be learned and applied to a new generation of children of war? Children from different Arabic-speaking countries have different needs, and when war is factored into their childhood development, the educational challenges increase. The cultural and sociopolitical background experiences of each learner should be addressed as an integral part of the planning process for optimal instruction, while honoring individual interests and building on academic strengths.

If the United States is truly committed to the concept that no child should be left behind, these and other questions deserve thoughtful responses. Perhaps Abdallah, and the many bilingual students like him, can continue to provide some of the much needed, action-oriented answers as educators across the United States strive to scaffold Arabic-speaking ELLs to literacy success. Teachers of Arabic-speaking ELLs need answers as they strive to effectively design and implement instruction for this growing population. Such a goal will require more teacher training based on research findings and the translation of those findings into practice.

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