

# Mainstreaming Arabic Second Language Acquisition Research: An Introduction

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The papers included in this issue represent the current dominant trend in Arabic second language acquisition research in the United States: micro-level research designs, combining quantitative and qualitative research tools to address specific empirical questions aimed to improve the quality of instruction, learning opportunities, and teaching materials. This trend draws on theoretical models of the acquisition of a wide range of languages to demonstrate that the acquisition of Arabic, despite its structural and sociolinguistic “unique” properties, follows universal cognitive patterns, even if some of these properties might require special attention. At the same time, these research designs, while attempting to better understand the processes involved in the acquisition of particular linguistic features of Arabic, feed back into generalizable theoretical models of language acquisition beyond Arabic.

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In their paper *So I Think دبابة is 'Bear'! An Initial Data-driven Explanation of How Arabic Students Use Captioned Video to Learn Vocabulary*, Paula Winke, Elizabeth Huntley, and Susan Gass utilize eye-movement tracking techniques to investigate how Arabic L2 learners make use of video captions to acquire new vocabulary items. By triangulating the eye-tracking data with a recall task, a vocabulary knowledge scale task, a free-recall task, and semi-structured interviews with stimulated recall, they conclude that the multimodality of captioned authentic videos enhances the acquisition of new vocabulary items, particularly those that are more salient and frequent. By comparing the eye-movement patterns of the participants who learned new words to the patterns of those who did not, it is possible to map out the vocabulary acquisition processes resulting from using captions. The participants who acquired new words showed a consistent pattern, measured in terms of dwell time, starting with recognition (developing and verifying hypotheses regarding form-meaning connections) and culminating with reinforcement. The dwell times of those who did not acquire new vocabulary items were far from consistent.

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews corroborate the quantitative data, as the participants demonstrated metacognitive awareness of the various stages of vocabulary acquisition. These findings indicate that the acquisition of Arabic vocabulary as a result of using captions follows a similar trajectory as in other languages (See Bird & Williams, 2002; Montero Perez, Peters, & Desmet, 2014;

Vanderplank, 1988). The paper raises a series of questions concerning some factors that may impact the effectiveness of using captioned videos for vocabulary acquisition. These potential factors include video speed, learners' proficiency, and the targeting of specific words in the captions. These questions steer future research on the use of Arabic captions in the same direction as their use for other languages despite the often-cited uniqueness of Arabic (Stevens, 2006; Wiley, Wilson, & Rapp 2016; Showalter & Hayes-Harb, 2015).

Mahmoud Azzaz, author of *Context of Learning and Overcoming Protracted Instability at the Interface in Advanced L2 Learning: Evidence from Definite Plurals in L2 Arabic*, adopts the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace, 2005; 2011; 2014; Sorace & Serratrice, 2009) to account for the protracted instability and residual inconsistency in advanced Arabic L2 learners' interpretations of generic and specific Arabic definite plurals, a syntax-semantics interface property. By using two elicitation production tasks (sentence completion and oral narratives), Azzaz compares the patterns of definite plurals use in the performance of participants who studied Arabic only in a domestic setting (US universities) and those who participated in study abroad programs. The qualitative language contact profiles helped develop a better understanding of the participants' experiences with learning Arabic in a classroom setting and in study abroad contexts, as well as their reflections on their experiences. As predicted, both groups performed at target-like levels on specific interpretations of definite plurals, which can be attributed to L1 transfer. For definite plurals with generic interpretations, however, the study abroad group demonstrated a

much higher degree of stability and accuracy, while the domestic classroom only group performed at chance fluctuating between definite and bare plurals. This pattern was replicated in the results of the oral narrative task. Data from the participants' language contact profiles confirm the hypothesis that their patterns of generic definite plurals production can be attributed to input conditions in their learning contexts in terms of contact hours, out of class active use of the target language, and curriculum design.

The paper concludes that impoverished input, as in the case of domestic in-class only instruction, results in protracted instability in the production of target-like forms, even at the advanced levels of proficiency. This instability is reduced significantly as a result of "input flooding," which is a typical characteristic of immersion learning contexts such as study abroad programs, leading to inhibiting L1 features. As for how the study abroad group diminished the effects of their L1 negative transfer, namely the use of bare plurals in generic contexts, the paper proposes that learners utilize indirect negative evidence, or the absence of the L1 feature in the L2 input, to inhibit the production of the non-target forms. In other words, "input flooding" promotes L2 acquisition in two distinct ways, as it reinforces target forms while inhibiting non-target forms. In addition to providing empirical support to the effectiveness of study abroad experiences in enhancing L2 development at the advanced levels, this paper offers valuable insights into the processes involved in maximizing L2 development in immersion contexts.

Abdulkafi Albirini's paper, entitled *Comparing L1 and L2 Transfer Effects in Definite Article Usage by Heritage and Second Language Learners of Standard Arabic*, hypothesizes that typological proximity plays a key role in language transfer and that the L1 positive and negative transfer effects change as learners advance their linguistic skills. By analyzing the performance of 149 elementary, intermediate, and advanced heritage and L2 participants on a fill-in-the-blank task and a translation task, Albirini demonstrates that L1 Colloquial Arabic plays a facilitative role in heritage learners' use of the definite article, particularly at the elementary levels. English, on the other hand, plays both a facilitative and a non-facilitative role for both groups. Predictably, data from the elicitation tasks show that L1 transfer gives heritage learners a clear advantage at the elementary levels. However, both groups performed better on the linguistic patterns shared by English and Standard Arabic than on divergent and mixed patterns, providing evidence of positive and negative transfer from English for both groups.

In terms of theoretical import, the paper examines three models of language transfer that can potentially account for the patterns attested in the results of the heritage learners group, for whom Standard Arabic is L3, since Colloquial Arabic and English are their L1 and L2, respectively (Albirini & Benmamoun, 2012; Albirini 2015). The first is the Cumulative Enhancement Model (Flynn, Foley, & Vinnitskaya, 2004), which proposes that previously acquired languages can either affect the acquisition of L3 positively or they play a neutral role. The second is the Typological Primacy Model (Rothman, 2010,

2011, 2015; Rothman & Cabrelli Amaro, 2010), which while suggesting that L1 and L2 can play either a facilitative or a non-facilitative role in the acquisition of L3, it posits whole L1 and L2 system transfer. The third is the Linguistic Proximity Model (Westergaard, Mitrofanova, Mykhaylyk, & Rodina, 2017), which agrees that that positive and negative transfer from L1 and L2 is possible, but it requires transfer to take place on a property-by-property basis. The data from the heritage learners' use of the definite article clearly align with the predictions of the Linguistic Proximity Model. That is because transfer does not seem to occur on a whole system level, especially that the heritage learners group performed poorly on mixed and divergent patterns. Rather, the data strongly suggest that transfer takes place on an individual linguistic feature level. By comparing linguistic performance across proficiency levels, transfer from L1 and/or L2, as expected, seems to diminish at the advanced levels. What is significant is that heritage learners make minimal transfer gains as they progress toward the advanced levels, which can be attributed to fossilization and their imperfect knowledge of L1 Colloquial Arabic.

*Multidialectal Use of L2 Arabic: A Study of Advanced Learners' Profiles*, by Lama Nassif and Nesrine Basheer, investigates the impact of first-year Arabic curricula on advanced L2 Arabic learners' codeswitching patterns and metasociolinguistic awareness as evidenced in their reflections as well as oral and written production. To this end, the authors use a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, including a language learning history survey in English, samples of elicited semi-spontaneous oral

production in Arabic, reflections in English on Standard and Colloquial Arabic use, and planned oral and written production in Arabic. They identify a series of factors that influence how advanced Arabic L2 learners use Standard and Colloquial Arabic, including personal preferences, discourse topics, communication contexts, and interpersonal cues.

The results show that initial training plays a critical role in the development of L2 Arabic learners' sociolinguistic awareness in terms of codeswitching. For example, the participants who learned only Standard Arabic in their first year demonstrated a predominance of this variety in their oral and written production. Those whose initial training focused on Colloquial Arabic had a much higher percentage of that variety in the semi-spontaneous spoken production task, even if they studied Standard Arabic extensively later. The latter group's codeswitching patterns better approximate the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic. As for planned written production, all the participants used Colloquial Arabic minimally (1% or less) regardless of the curricular designs of their initial training. The patterns of Colloquial and Standard Arabic use in the participants' production across different contexts provide strong support for multidialectal curricular designs, which are becoming dominant in Arabic programs in US universities (Al-Batal, 2018; Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006; Younes, 2015).

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