**Review of Arabic Second Language Acquisition of Morphosyntax**


Review by Ayman Mohamed  
Second Language Studies Program  
Michigan State University  
mohame44@msu.edu

The goal of this book is to combine data-driven findings in the area of Arabic language acquisition with a focus on the order of acquisition, developmental stages and learning patterns of linguistic structures of Arabic. The author starts with research questions on the variables involved in learning Arabic including the developmental path, the role of transfer, the effect of instruction, and other factors involved. Methodologically, the book draws on a pool of longitudinally collected oral data from 9 learners of Arabic and a cross-sectional sample of 109 learners with different native languages including English, French, Spanish, and Japanese. Data were elicited through information gap activities and picture description tasks. Based on analyses from this data, chapters are systematically developed to address topics in separate chapters for discussing the acquisition of specific target features.

In the first chapter, the author provides a brief account of the target structures relevant to the discussion points in later chapters. He gives a concise explanation of word structure, phrasal agreement, verbal structure agreement, gender agreement, and negation patterns. The author selected these structures in particular based on a common observation that although these features are taught quite early in language classrooms, some learners may not acquire them in the expected sequence.

The second chapter counts as a literature review of the existing research in Arabic SLA. The review focuses on studies that investigated the order of acquisition of certain Arabic structures under the Processability Theory framework (Pienemann, 1998; 2005) and through the UG perspective under the Full Transfer/Full Access proposal (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996). However, it seemed from the review that the studies that actually existed were very few in number and very limited in scope. This was one main reason that justified the author’s stance and highlighted the significance of the book.

The empirical portion of the book, which is presented from chapter three to chapter six, relies on both longitudinal and
cross-sectional data of one wide-scale study. In each chapter, the author clearly lays out the procedures, tasks and analyses in a way that is easy to understand especially for readers who do not have an Arabic background. Chapter three presents the findings on nominal agreement, verbal agreement, and demonstrative agreement. Chapter four discusses the acquisition of tense/aspect and verbal agreement based on a cross-sectional data from English L1, Spanish L1, and Japanese L1. Chapter five focuses on the acquisition of null subjects using the same cross-sectional data while chapter six is devoted to the features of negation, case and mood. The author also provides a content analysis of the textbooks used in Arabic program highlighting the order of presentation for the target structures.

With chapter seven, the author concludes his empirical finding by presenting theoretical underpinnings that could account for the trend of results shown in previous chapters. The bulk of discussion included L2 learnability and processability, L1 transfer and UG access, ultimate attainment and near nativeness, the split INFL hypothesis, and more theoretical implications on UG access and transfer. Although some results provided support for Processability Theory, the author assumes that the Full Transfer/Full Access model is the best representative of the pattern of results found with only minor exceptions that may fall under the Speech Processing model.

In the final chapter, the author provides realistic and useful implications related to material preparation, instruction, teacher preparation, and proficiency testing. By acknowledging research findings in this area, the field of Arabic applied linguistics and pedagogy could be pushed further to find its place among SLA mainstream publications. The author concludes by a call for more research on different populations and in different learning contexts.

In general evaluation, the book is valuable in terms of its topic on Arabic SLA, which has been less well represented in the literature because it is a less commonly taught language. Given the current increasing demand to learn Arabic, especially in the US, a parallel concern was raised about ways of accommodating this need and developing strategies, material, and methods to best serve this purpose. However, the field is still suffering from lack of connection between materials writers, Arabic teachers, professionals, researchers, and testers. This created a gap both in research and pedagogical practices. This book comes out in response to this need for the integration of research and pedagogy.

One advantage of the book is that it combines the bulk of research related to the topic, providing a starting point for further research. Although few studies existed, the author manages to give the reader a sufficient background about the topic. The author organizes research foci by chapters, which makes it easier for the readers to follow and even to pick the topics that are more interesting to pursue. The chapters are not dependent on each other, so that a reader can simply read a chapter as a separate research article. The discussion of
theoretical models seems to be simple and appropriate to the novice reader who does not have to refer back to outside sources for additional theoretical background. Methodologically, the author/researcher relies on a broad pool of cross-sectional and longitudinal data that he distributes around chapters and presents relevant results according to topic. The variety of the sample is noticed as the data included participants from US, Spain and Japan. Technically, the experimental procedures are presented in a manner that allows replication as the author included screenshots of the material used for the oral elicitation tasks. Results are presented clearly through a very good integration of tables and graphs.

On the other hand, the book is limited in scope in the sense that it is mainly based on the researcher/author’s own work with very few references to other studies. This is justified, however, by the fact that there is really a lack of research in this particular area and that the author’s purpose is to encourage future research by supplying detailed and categorized portions of his own work in an appealing style. At the end of the book, it is evident that it is difficult to arrive at conclusive answers to the research questions posed in the first chapter, but the author did his best in approaching the problem and providing sound explanations from several theoretical backgrounds.

The greatest contribution of this book is to make this research available with the goal of integrating it into mainstream SLA studies, challenging the current state of alienation that Arabic applied linguistics is facing. It is a comprehensive resource for teachers, textbook authors and testers, and most importantly researchers with Arabic linguistics background who can bridge the gap between theory and practice and respond to the current demands of the field.

References