Current issues in bilingualism: Cognitive and socio-linguistic perspectives*

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Current issues in bilingualism: Cognitive and socio-linguistic perspectives, is a valuable compilation of empirical studies conducted in Israel on different bilingual and multilingual populations. The various studies investigate different aspects of additional language acquisition. The well written introduction sets the stage for the three sections by describing "the language and literacy... multilingual mosaic of Israel" (Leikin, Schwartz & Tobin, p. 2) where Hebrew, Arabic, English, Russian and Amharic all feature as first or additional languages and literacies. Due to limitations regarding the scope of this review, the main focus will be on the first section of the book followed by some highlights from the third section.

The first section of the book: ‘Language and Literacy in Multilingual Society’ attempts to understand the processes of reading and writing acquisition amongst children from different language backgrounds and what predicts their literacy acquisition success. Kahn-Horwitz, Sparks, and Goldstein examine the connection between underlying abilities measured in Hebrew as a first language (L1) and their ability to predict English reading comprehension 6 years later.

More specifically to what extent L1 underlying abilities such as phonological and morphological awareness predict English literacy acquisition as well as the extent to which basic English literacy abilities predict English as a foreign language (EFL) word reading and reading comprehension in 9th grade. Relevant questions arising from this study for Arabic L1 speaking children would be to what extent is a theory connecting abilities measured in L1 and EFL success relevant to Arabic L1 speaking children?

In her chapter entitled "Literacy reflexes of Arabic diglossia", Saiegh-Haddad provides insights about differences between spoken and literary Arabic which appear mostly in the lexicon but also in phonology, morphology and syntax. She goes on to explain what is universal and what is specific about reading acquisition in Arabic. Phonological awareness is considered to be universally crucial for reading acquisition. Saiegh-Haddad investigates the case of Arabic "where reading is first learned in a language that is phonologically distinct from the oral language [children] ... have already acquired" (Saiegh-Haddad, 2012, p. 47). She finds that this difference causes substantial obstacles for Arabic children until the end of second grade.

Eviatar and Ibrahim report on Arabic children after being exposed to MSA showing similar metalinguistic profiles characteristic of bilingual children (Russian-Hebrew speakers), i.e., higher scores on metalinguistic tasks together with smaller vocabulary size. They bring evidence showing the linguistic complexity required of L1 speaking Arabs in Israel who may be considered quadrilingual with spoken Arabic as L1, and MSA, Hebrew and English as additional languages. Spoken Arabic doesn't have a written form, and so for L1 Arabic speaking children, all writing and reading takes place in non-native languages. Eviatar and Ibrahim discuss the crucial role of diacritics for improving reading accuracy of both beginning and skilled Arabic readers.

The third section of the book: 'Multilingual acquisition and processing' consists of five chapters. Together with research findings showing less accurate and slower letter identification in L2 amongst dyslexic bilinguals, Breznitz and Fabian provide an updated review of behavioural and brain based findings regarding typically developing versus dyslexic individuals in their L1 and L2. Ferman and Karni discuss the types of memory used for L2 acquisition and then report results of an intervention study amongst adults, showing the use of both declarative and procedural memory for acquiring an artificial morphological rule where aspects of the rule (phonological versus semantic) are acquired using different memory functions at different acquisition stages. Armon-Lotem, Adam, Blass, Fine, Harel, Saiegh-Haddad and Walters present results on a study of bilingual English-Hebrew preschoolers with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) and found their errors to be similar to monolingual SLI preschoolers. These findings imply that bilingualism should not be abandoned in the case of children with SLI.
Without doubt a book of this nature is relevant to academics and students both locally and internationally where educators grapple with issues that arise from individual differences combined with acquisition of more than one language and literacy. In educational graduate programs where language teachers discuss and consider educational dilemmas regarding additional language acquisition, it is a pleasure to be able to draw on this current compilation of chapters combining rich theoretical input with empirical evidence conducted from a cognitive, psycholinguistic and socio-linguistic perspective on different bilingual or multilingual populations.