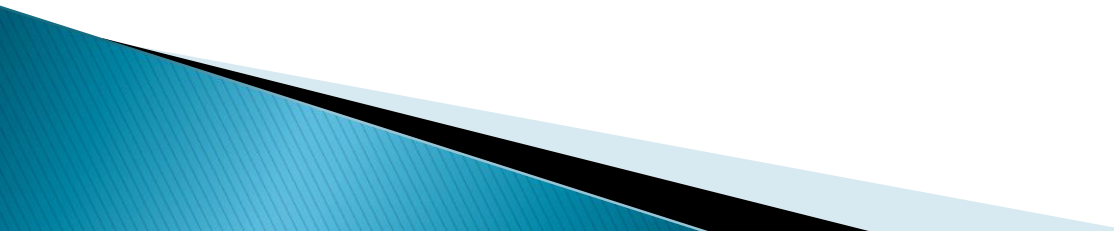# L1 Arabic speakers' difficulties with reading in English

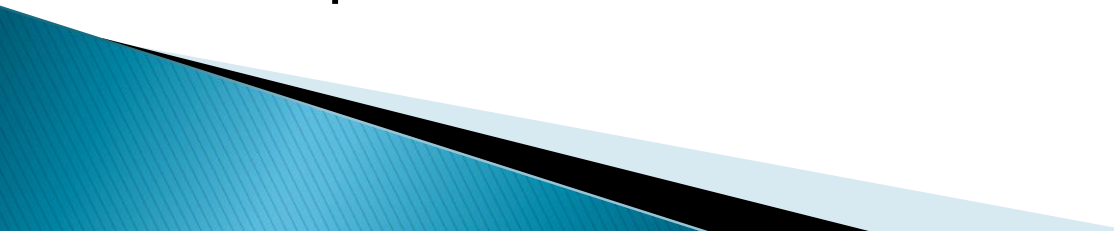Anne Kavanagh

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Outline

▸ Background

▸ Reading

▸ Comparing English and Arabic

▸ Learning to read in Arabic L1

▸ Cross-linguistic effects

▸ Implications

Arabic speakers' difficulties
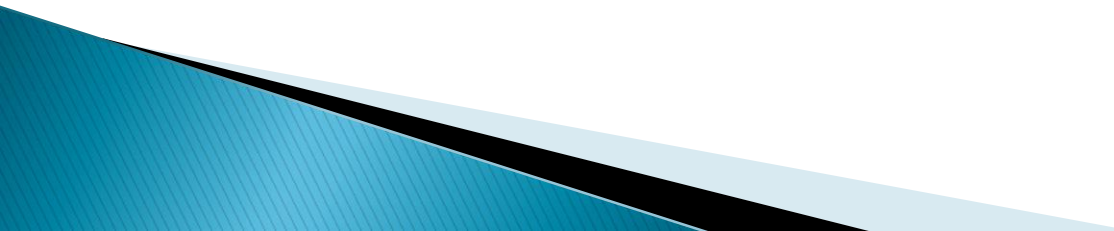
What kind of linguistic skill problems have you noticed that Arabic speaking students have?

- Apparent imbalance in proficiencies: speaking vs. reading and writing
- Often poor in spelling
- Poor in word recognition
- Often slower at reading → impact on reading comprehension

Reading in English

- How did you learn to read in English?
  - By which method? Reading aloud or silently?
- Dual-route
  - Mapping sounds to letters, e.g. d-o-g, p-e-n (phoneme-to-grapheme)
  - Learning words as a whole, e.g. island, through (sight-word recognition)

- Spelling is key in word recognition

Reading processes

- Bottom-up model: building blocks

- Top-down model: holistic

- Combination: currently accepted view

- 'Word recognition is where lower and higher level processes meet' (Randall, 2009:118).

Characteristics of the written languages

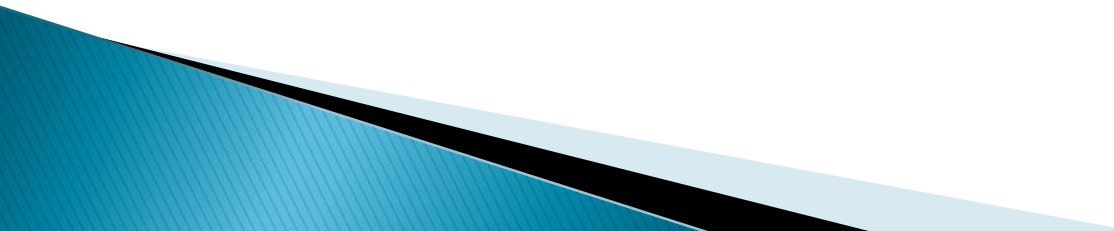**English**
- alphabetic
- from left to right
- 26 letters (44 sounds)
- 5 vowel letters (but 20 vowel sounds)
- deep orthography

Arabic (MSA)
- alphabetic
- from right to left
- 28 letters
- 3 long vowels
- 3 short vowel diacritics
- two scripts:
  ◦ shallow
  ◦ deep

Learning to read in Arabic

- Literary Arabic vs spoken Arabic

- Year 1-2 shallow

- Year 3+ deep

- Shallow (fully vowelised)

  Full provision

- Deep (unvowelised)

  Lacking

Learning to read in Arabic L1

▸ Regular morphological word structure

  ◦ root + affixes
  ◦ indicate word class, person, tense, act/pass
  ◦ same root semantically related

  k-t-b → *kataba* (wrote), *maktab* (office),
  kitaab (book), *yaktub* (write)

  d-r-s → dars (lesson), *darasa* (studied), *mudaris*
  (teacher), *madrasa* (school)

  s-k-n → *sakana* (lived), *sakan* (hostel/house),
  sukina (was lived - passive form)

  highly homographic

Roots, affixes and diacritics

كتب (wrote - *kataba*)

مكتب (office - *maktab*)

كتاب (book – *kitaab*)

دَرْس (lesson – *dars*)

دَرَسَ (studied – *darasa*)

Impact on Arabic reading processes

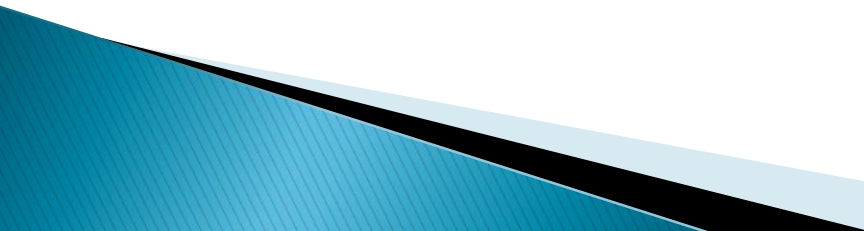| Vowelised script (novice/poor readers)	Unvowelised script (good readers)

▸ Reliance on:

- Phonological processing (each word has semantic autonomy)

- (Some priming assistance from sentence context)

▸ Reliance on:

- Prior knowledge of word morphology (attention to consonants)

- Sentence context (lack of semantic autonomy)

Cross-linguistic effects

Transfer to reading in L2

- Five vowel letters, but 20 vowel sounds – lack of awareness

- Too much to process → 'vowel blindness'

- Importance of English vowels

- Default dependence on consonants leads to confusion

Cross-linguistic effects

Target	Realisation
biscuit	basket
circuit	cricket
bowl	ball
hair	higher
blew	below
capsule	capture
grill	girl
protein	Britain
abroad	aboard
difficult	different
thorough	throw
spade	speed

Adapted from Ryan and Meara (1991:532)

Cross-linguistic effects

Transfer to reading in L2
- English spelling

    ◦ lack of regularity
    cheese, chord, yacht, chef; easy, ear, earth

    ◦ lack of consistency
    trip, rip, lip
    heal, plead, dream / head, dealt, dreamt / learner, heart, steak

    ◦ *nation, national, nationality; compete, competitive, competition*

- L1 processing skill of using context may mask difficulties in word recognition

Implications

- word recognition alongside higher level processing

- awareness of phonological representation

- spelling patterns

- learners' background

- exposure to English texts

- further research

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- Ryan, A. and Meara, P. (1991) The case of the invisible vowels: Arabic speakers reading English words. *Reading in a Foreign Language* 7 (2): 531-540.

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