This paper examines the negative impact of the linguistic situation in the Arab world, characterised as it is by the phenomenon of diglossia, on Arab children's ability to acquire reading and writing skills in Arabic; and hence on their academic attainment in general. Above all, the paper emphasises the necessity to expose young children to literary Arabic, by means such as story reading to preschoolers, so that it is not, in effect, another language that they have to learn as soon as they enter school. Specific obstacles posed by contemporary Arabic diglossia to the acquisition of literacy are discussed, including the attitudes of parents and teachers to the colloquial and standard forms of Arabic. These include modification of the Arabic script, and improving the status of Arabic as a language of instruction in the schools, where it is often replaced by English or French. Some remedies are suggested.

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