

Promoting research and best practices to improve the use of English in the emerging global knowledge economy of the 21st century

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Interview with Dr. Hassan El-Nabih

Editor's note: In this interview, we talk with Dr. Hassan El-Nabih, a 2008 Sheikh Nahayan Fellow, about his dissertation, research interests, and current work.

TIRF: Your dissertation was entitled, "The Acquisition of the English Causative-inchoative Alternation by Arabic Native Speakers." What was it about and what were your major findings?



Dr. El-Nabih: If you have ever taught English to Arabic native speakers (NSs), perhaps you have noticed sentences like "The rabbit was disappeared" or "The woman laughed the child." My study investigated Arabic NSs' acquisition of what is called the English *causative-inchoative alternation* (e.g., "Tom broke the cup" vs. "The cup broke").

An inchoative verb is one which signals a change of state (e.g., *break* in the second example above). My data analyses indicated that the English causative-inchoative alternation posed a learnability problem for the Arab participants, including *overpassivization* (as in "The rabbit was disappeared"). These errors can largely be attributed to L1 transfer, since Arabic is quite different from English in terms of how it encodes the causative-inchoative alternation. In my study, interlanguage development towards target-like English forms was clearly observed across the proficiency groups, but there was still a strong influence of L1 transfer on even the high proficiency participants.

TIRF: Based on your research, what are you doing to address this issue in your classroom?

Dr. El-Nabih: I believe that the subtleties involved in this linguistic phenomenon require that Arab EFL learners receive effective explicit instruction. As a teacher of linguistics and EFL courses, I try to help my Arab students consciously recognize that verbs like *swim* and *laugh* (and their equivalents in Arabic) have agentive subjects, whereas verbs like *die* and *disappear* (and their equivalents in Arabic) have non-agentive subjects. I also explicitly emphasize the differences between causative, inchoative, and passive structures, so that my students can discover the relationship between these linguistic constructions and their communicative functions. I point out that a causative structure (e.g., "Tom broke the cup") denotes a bringing about a change of state: It can be paraphrased in terms of *cause* ("Tom caused the cup to break"), while an inchoative structure (e.g., "The cup broke") only denotes a change of state and can be paraphrased in terms of *become* plus an adjective ("The cup became broken").

Similarly, I highlight the differences between the passive and inchoative structures. The passive has an implied agent, whereas the inchoative lacks an agent. That is, inchoative situations occur spontaneously. Instruction can explicitly emphasize the fact that variation in agentivity accounts for how passives and inchoatives differ in what expressions they allow. For example, passives — but not inchoatives — allow agentive *by*-phrases, agent-oriented adverbs (e.g., *carelessly*), and purpose clauses. In contrast, non-agent-oriented adverbs, such as *spontaneously*, *by itself*, and *on its own* are allowed in inchoatives, but not in passives. I try to draw my students' attention to the salient linguistic differences between English and Arabic in terms of these features.

TIRF: What did you learn about doing research in the process of completing your dissertation?

Dr. El-Nabih: Throughout my doctoral program at Boston College, I had 20 graduate courses, which broadened my academic horizons remarkably and provided me with state-of-the-art knowledge about conducting research quantitatively and qualitatively. In one of the courses, the Dissertation Seminar, I gained brilliant ideas about the format and content of a proposal and dissertation. In addition, through the cross registration program, I received insightful comments and ideas in a directed study course under the supervision of Professor Paul Hagstrom, a Boston University expert in Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition. Designing and piloting my dissertation instruments were special outcomes of these meetings.

TIRF: What are your current research interests, and how did your dissertation influence them?

Dr. El-Nabih: I love teaching and doing research in linguistics. Second language acquisition is the research area that most appeals to me. Following an avenue for future research suggested in my dissertation, I am currently studying two groups of Arabic NSs to explore the effects of explicit and implicit instruction on certain types of English verbs. In this research, I argue that explicit instruction is more effective than implicit instruction in the teaching of English verb types.

TIRF: Where are you currently working and what does your position involve?

Dr. El-Nabih: Since 1997, I have been a full-time lecturer of courses in Linguistics and EFL at the Islamic University of Gaza, Palestine. My experiences during my MA and PhD programs have had a positive influence upon my teaching career.

TIRF: What did receiving a Sheikh Nahayan Fellowship mean to you?

Dr. El-Nabih: The Sheikh Nahayan Fellowship administered by TIRF is a prestigious award intended to stimulate English language education research in the Arabic-speaking world. Receiving one of these fellowships was a great honor for me. It was an affirmation of the tremendous work I was undertaking. This fellowship significantly boosted my self-confidence and motivated me to concentrate more on my doctoral work and finish it quickly and efficiently. My special gratitude must go to all those who made the Fellowship program a reality.

TIRF: What advice would you give people who are just beginning their doctoral research?

Dr. El-Nabih: I believe that one's doctoral work will shape his/her future; therefore, choosing a field to carry out such work is critical. In addition, deciding what constitutes an important problem for doctoral research means passing an important milestone on this road. Furthermore, having a supervisor who has the time and knowledge to help implies that the doctoral student is on the right track. Moreover, it is essential that a doctoral student is self-confident and loves what he/she is doing in this challenging experience. Finally, I believe that hard work surely pays off.

TIRF: What would you say to someone who is considering donating to TIRF?

Dr. El-Nabih: TIRF is doing a great job in the field of English language education research. Therefore, I strongly encourage anyone who is interested in promoting scientific inquiry in this field to consider donating to TIRF.

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Mailing Address:

177 Webster St., # 220
Monterey, CA 93940 USA

Email Address:

info@tirfonline.org

Visit TIRF online at
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Kathleen Bailey,
Chair of TIRF

Pearson Foundation Gives Generous Gift to TIRF

PEARSON FOUNDATION

We are pleased to announce that TIRF has received a gift of \$25,000 from the [Pearson Foundation](#). This philanthropic organization collaborates with nonprofit groups to “foster innovation and find workable solutions to the educational disadvantages facing young people and adults across the globe.”

TIRF Board member, Joanne Dresner, President of Pearson's Professional Development International business, had this to say about the decision to support TIRF: “I'm proud that the Pearson Foundation recognizes the

Updates: US Conference on Adult Literacy and *TESOL Connections*

US Conference on Adult Literacy

[The US Conference on Adult Literacy](#) (USCAL), to be held October 31 to November 2, 2013, in Washington, D.C., brings together a diverse group of national organizations committed to the literacy and education needs of the nation and the world. The USCAL planning team is looking for presentations that share proven successful strategies and practical tools for adult literacy instruction, program management and leadership, and advocacy.

The USCAL will address a number of issues facing adult literacy programs in various areas, including workforce training and career pathways, fundraising, citizenship education, health literacy, financial literacy, English language learning, contextualized learning, technology and digital literacy, and public policy and advocacy concerns. Individuals interested in presenting at the conference can [find the call for proposals here](#). The submission deadline for proposals is December 14, 2012.

If you have questions, please contact the USCAL team at conference@proliteracy.org.

British Council Awards for Research and Assessment

The British Council has recently released information about several research awards and grants. These awards are designed to further research globally in the area of assessment. There are various awards and grants aimed at a broad range of researchers and test developers.

Assessment Research Awards will be given to assist research students in their data collection, in analysis activities, or in presenting their work at an international conference. The application should be completed by the research student and his/her academic supervisor. It should also include either details of how the award will contribute to the completion of the student's work, or details of the paper accepted for presentation at the conference. The maximum value is £2,500 per award.

Innovation in Assessment Prizes are designed to complement the existing British Council [ELTons Awards](#) and celebrate innovation in the area of language testing and assessment. The *Innovation in Assessment Prize*

importance of supporting TIRF's goals to generate new knowledge and improve the quality of English language teaching and learning. I'm also confident that TIRF will use this gift wisely to fund valuable research that has a practical application in our field.”

Donna Christian, TIRF's Treasurer, acknowledged the significant contribution the Pearson Foundation makes to TIRF's work. She stated that the “generous donation from the Pearson Foundation provides TIRF with much needed resources to pursue our mission, helping us to support and disseminate research to address important issues in English language education around the world. Their support is greatly appreciated!”

Call for Proposals: *TESOL Connections* New Section

TESOL Connections (TC) Quick Tips are short, novel, easy-to-follow ideas for use in the English language classroom or in any aspect of English language teaching. The monthly publication is an electronic newsletter sent to individuals who sign-up. TESOL encourages the submission of feature articles, brief news items, or noncommercial resources for inclusion in this newsletter.

TC has issued a call for submissions to contribute to its newsletter. There is no deadline for the publication of feature articles because of rolling submission process. However, submissions for resources must be received at least one week prior to the first of the month if the particular feature is to be published in the upcoming month's newsletter. (For January, though, the submission deadline is December 16th because of the holiday break.)

For more information on TC's guidelines, please [click here](#). Past issues of *TESOL Connections* can be [found here](#). For further inquiry, please write to Tomiko Breland at tc@tesol.org.

will be made to an individual or organization for innovation in any of the following areas:

classroom assessment; practices in test delivery or test administration; technical innovation in scoring or reporting; item or task development; and the application of Applied Linguistics or SLA research to language assessment. The prize is £1,000.

The *International Assessment Award* will be made to an individual working for the promotion of excellence in language assessment on the international stage. The award will be made to an individual who is nominated by his/her peers in the area of assessment, and will consist of a formal citation and an honorarium of £1,000.

Please note that the application deadline for each of the awards above is January 10, 2013. For more information on these awards and others, please [click here](#).

Report from the Chair — The Spirit of “Giving Tuesday”

The winter holiday season is well under way in the northern hemisphere. Whether you celebrate Bodhi Day, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Pancha Ganapati, Boxing Day, or Christmas, December is a month of gift giving, and, of course, shopping. Unfortunately, the true spirit of these holidays can easily be overshadowed by the frenzy of holiday spending.

Over the years in the US, consumerism has led to the advent of “Black Friday,” the day after Thanksgiving and the busiest shopping day of the year. On that day, many businesses open their doors very early (or very late at night, in some instances) to offer deep discounts on

their products, to jumpstart their sales, and ultimately to grow their revenues. Spin-offs of Black Friday include “Small Business Saturday” and “Cyber Monday.”

Because these three days were established to promote for-profit businesses, “[Giving Tuesday](#),” according to its website, was established to “create a national day of giving at the start of the annual holiday season.” This day is meant to encourage “charitable activities that support nonprofit organizations,” like TIRF.

Giving Tuesday fell on November 27th this year. For this reason, I would like to encourage all TIRF

stakeholders to participate belatedly in the spirit of Giving Tuesday. Think about the following prospect: If all of the readers of *TIRF Today* gave a five-dollar donation, we would raise \$20,000 — and this amount would far surpass our individual donor giving totals for any previous year.

No matter what traditions you observe this season, will you please help us by [making a donation](#) of any size to TIRF? As you're making your holiday gift list, please remember the Foundation. Let's make today “Giving-to-TIRF Friday!”

Kathi Bailey

