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Intensive Productive Vocabulary Learning: A Single Subject Case Study of Arabic as a Foreign Language

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Abstract. This paper reports on the results of intensive productive vocabulary learning sessions from word cards that lasted for 20 days. The aim was to test the effectiveness of intensive productive vocabulary learning in three respects: firstly, to test its impact on the overall productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge as measured by immediate productive and receptive recall tests; secondly, to test the impact of this type of learning on the performance of the subject and whether it drops off as large quantities of input are maintained over an extended time period of learning sessions; and thirdly, to see if there is a marked decay of productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge as indicated by delayed recall tests administered 10 days after the end of the learning sessions.

The results of the study show that productive vocabulary learning is an effective way of learning vocabulary both productively and receptively. It leads to very high and almost similar immediate productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge. The overall retention rate was 94% and 95% respectively. With reference to the progressive productive performance of the subject, the results show a full retention rate (100%) for words learned in the early learning sessions with a slight drop off in the middle (96%) with more drop off (83%) towards the end of these learning sessions. Furthermore, the results of the delayed recall test indicate that the acquired vocabulary knowledge decayed at different rates. That is, productive vocabulary knowledge (50%) was more susceptible to forgetting than receptive vocabulary knowledge (73%).

List of Abbreviations

DT: Delayed Test

FLL: Foreign Language Learning

IPT: Immediate Productive Test

IRT: Immediate Receptive Test

IT: Immediate Test

L1: First Language

L2: Second/Foreign Language

LSs: Learning Sessions

PK: Productive Knowledge

RK: Receptive Knowledge

SLL: Second Language Learning

Introduction

The desire to learn a large number of vocabulary items by foreign language learners (FLL) as well as second language learners (SLL) is evident to those who are involved in the field of language learning and teaching. Moreover, this desire sometimes becomes a need in many situations for beginning FLL/SLL in order to advance their language progress and achievement in a short period of time and to meet the requirements of the program they are enrolled in. Nonetheless, this task can not be achieved easily. Furthermore, even if a large number of vocabulary items are learned/memorized in a short period of time, they seem to be easily forgotten. Pemberton (2003: p. 251) maintains that "Learners around the world testify to the fact that the big problem with vocabulary is forgetting".

The literature of L2 vocabulary usually distinguishes between two types of vocabulary learning—receptive vocabulary learning and productive vocabulary learning (cf. Nation (2001), for example). The former basically means learning a word from L2 to L1, while the latter means learning a word from L1 to L2. Consequently, the receptive vocabulary knowledge is mainly the knowledge of the meaning of L2 words and the learner with this type of knowledge should be able to translate from L2 to L1. In contrast, productive vocabulary knowledge entails the ability to produce L2 words and translate from L1 to L2.

L2 vocabulary literature also includes studies that investigated the effectiveness of receptive and productive vocabulary learning as we will see below. One simple conclusion of such research was that if the aim is both productive and receptive knowledge, productive vocabulary learning "is the best candidate because receptive learning does not result in a substantial amount of productive knowledge" (Mondria and Wiersma, 2004: p. 98)

Even though the L2 vocabulary literature is rich with such studies, researchers only concentrate on one single learning session. There has been no single research, to the best of my knowledge, designed to assess the impact of intensive productive vocabulary learning on productive and receptive knowledge and on the performance of learners in prolonged learning sessions. This study attempts to fill that gap.

Review of the Literature

The aim of this section is to present briefly a number of relevant experimental studies which have investigated the effectiveness of RVL and PVL.

Griffin and Harley (1996) compared of receptive and productive L2 vocabulary learning. The participants, high school learners, were required to learn French words. They were divided into two groups in terms of the direction of learning; half of them learned the words English-French while the other half learned the words French-English. After the learning task, half of the students of each group were tested receptively, and the other half productively. The test was repeated on the third, seventh and the 28th day. The researchers found that both receptive and productive learning yielded a substantial amount of productive and receptive knowledge respectively; participants got significantly higher scores on receptive tests than those on the productive tests. The overall retention rates as a result of the two different learning conditions—receptive and productive learning—decayed at a comparable rate.

In this experiment, Waring (1997) required his subjects to learn two sets of words—one set receptively and another set productively. The acquired knowledge of both sets was tested receptively and productively in a sequence of tests. Those tests took place 10 minutes after the learning task, the following day, one week later, and finally three months later. The major results of this study showed that productive learning demanded more time compared to receptive learning and yielded lower scores, and productive knowledge, regardless of the way it was acquired, decayed faster than receptive knowledge.

Schneider *et al.* (2002) required their subjects—American college students—in two experiments to learn a set of French words. In each experiment half of the students were required to learn the words receptively and took an immediate receptive retention test. In contrast, the other half learned the words productively and took an immediate productive recall test. One week later, half of the students of each group had to relearn the words receptively and were tested receptively. The other half of each group was tested productively after they had relearned the words productively. The results of this study showed that: firstly, both receptive learning and receptive relearning were more successful than productive learning and productive relearning. Secondly, both immediate and delayed receptive retention tests yielded higher scores than productive retention tests. Thirdly, productive learning was more conducive to receptive knowledge than receptive learning to productive knowledge. Finally, words that were learned productively decayed faster than words learned receptively.

In a recent study, Mondria and Wiersma (2004) investigated the popular belief of many foreign language teachers that words that are learned both receptively and productively—the combination method—are better retained than words that are learned just receptively. Pre-university level Dutch learners of French participated in this study. They were divided into three sets of learning conditions—a total of six learning groups (two receptive learning groups, two productive learning groups and two receptive + productive groups). The first learning group of each set of the three learning conditions was

tested receptively, while the second group of each set was tested productively. Tests were administered immediately after the learning sessions and one week later. The results of this experimental study showed that learning words both receptively and productively leads to a similar level of receptive retention as learning words just receptively; learning words both productively and receptively leads to a comparable level of productive retention as learning words just productively; productive learning leads to a considerable amount of receptive retention while receptive learning leads to a certain amount of productive retention; and productive learning is substantially more difficult than receptive learning.

Summary

It is evident from the above reviewed studies that both learning conditions—productive and receptive learning—lead to different levels of learning knowledge and there is a strong correlation between the learning condition and learning knowledge. That is, productive learning is usually conducive to more productive knowledge than receptive learning to productive knowledge and vice versa. This is true of all of the above studies with the exception of Schneider *et al.* (2002). Furthermore, these studies showed that productive learning is more difficult (Mondria and Wiersma, 2004), and requires more time than receptive learning (Waring, 1997). This difficulty is reflected in the lower scores obtained in productive retention tests (Griffin and Harley, 1996; Warning, 1997), and the success that learners had in both receptive learning and relearning in the study of Schneider *et al.* (2002). This in turn might lead us to conclude that productive knowledge is more susceptible to decay than receptive knowledge, a fact that was evident in most of the above experiments.

The Present Study

Questions of the study

The three goals of this study were reformulated in the form of the following three research questions:

Research question one: How effective is intensive productive vocabulary learning on the overall productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge measured by immediate productive and receptive recall tests?

Research question two: Is there any drop off of the performance of the subject as large quantities of input are maintained over an extended time period of learning sessions?

Research question three: Is there any marked decay of productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge as indicated by delayed recall tests administered 10 days after the administration of the immediate recall tests?

Learning materials

A list of 300 relatively high frequency Arabic words was selected for this experiment. These words were presented in the form of associative pairs—Arabic (L2) and English (L1). Each associative pair was presented on a vocabulary card. The cards were divided into 20 sets of cards, each set consisting of 15 cards with a total of 300 cards.

Participant

After learning about the aim and the learning task in this experiment, a 41-year-old female native speaker of English volunteered to participate in this study. She also showed some interest in learning Arabic words. At the time of the study, she had only a minimal exposure to Arabic and knew only a few Arabic words or phrases, e.g. greeting phrases.

Learning task and learning sessions

The learning task for the participant in this experiment was to learn productively a total of 300 associative pairs of Arabic-English words presented on vocabulary cards. Each day in the 20-day learning sessions was assigned a set of cards, each consisting of 15 cards. Accordingly, the participant was instructed to learn productively 15 words daily; a maximum of 30 minutes was allocated for each learning session. As the learning sessions progressed, the participant had the freedom to go back to previous word cards as many times as she wanted until the end of the 20-day period of the experiment. However, the learning/revising sessions were kept equal for all the sessions throughout the 20 days of the experiment. The participant was asked to indicate on each card how many times she revised/revisited each word by writing down a check mark on the specified box corresponding to the revising day. Furthermore, the participant was also asked to keep a diary of the strategies used for each day. At the end of experiment, the cards were collected from the participant.

Recall tests

At the end of the learning sessions, immediate productive and receptive recall tests were administered. These two recall tests were mainly translation tasks and consisted of 300 words each. In the productive recall test, the participant was required to provide the Arabic words, while in the receptive recall test the English translations were required. The productive recall test was given first and after a short break, the receptive recall test was administered. Ten days later, the delayed recall tests (productive and receptive) were administered.

Scoring

The researcher, a native speaker of Arabic and an experienced teacher of English, judged the correctness of the translation given by the participant in both productive and receptive tests. A lenient scoring schema was followed in scoring the productive tests as minor spelling mistakes were tolerated if there was no confusion with other words.

Data Analysis

The main focus of the data analysis in this study was on the participant's overall scores on the immediate and delayed recall tests, both productive and receptive. Accordingly, the participant had four scores: two immediate recall scores (receptive and productive) and two delayed scores (receptive and productive). The scores reflected the participant's retention rates (of the 300 words learned during the 20-day learning sessions) in the four tests.

The results were also looked at according to the progress of the learning sessions and the overall retention rate in each learning block. In this regard, the learning sessions were divided into four main learning blocks, five days of learning sessions in each learning block.

Summary of the Results

Based on the earlier mentioned three research questions, the results of this study will be dealt with in three different analyses. The first analysis will deal with the first research question and report on the overall level of the subject's performance as indicated by immediate productive and receptive recall tests. The second analysis will deal with the second research question and report on the performance of the subject during the 20-day learning sessions to see if there was any drop off of the performance in these learning sessions. It should be mentioned here that the learning sessions were divided into four equal learning blocks of five days each. The third analysis will deal with the third research question aiming at finding if there was any marked decay of both productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge measured by delayed recall tests administered 10 days after the immediate recall tests.

First research question: How effective is intensive productive vocabulary learning on the overall productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge measured by immediate productive and receptive recall tests?

Looking at the summary of the overall retention rates of the learned words in Table 1 below, the results of the immediate recall tests showed that the subject was able to recall 283 words (94%) in the productive test and was able to recognize 286 words (95%) in the receptive test of the learned words.

Table 1. Participants' score at the immediate retention tests

Type of Learning	Immediate Recall Tests			
	Recall test	%	Recognition test	%
Intensive productive vocabulary learning	283 recalled words	94	286 recognized words	95

It is evident here from the results of the immediate recall tests that intensive vocabulary productive learning leads to very high and almost similar productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge.

Second research question: Is there any drop off of the performance of the subject as large quantities of input are maintained over an extended time period of learning sessions?

As indicated earlier in this paper, the learning task for the participant in this study was divided into 20 learning sessions. The subject was instructed to learn productively 15 words in each learning session and the time allowed for each session was 30 minutes. It should be noticed here that the subject starting from the second learning session was able to go back to previously learned words for revision and there was no limitation on the number of the revisits in subsequent sessions. However, the subject had to do both the learning of new words and the revision of previously encountered words within the allocated time for each session, i.e. 30 minutes.

Table 2. Percentage of retention rate per learning block

Immediate productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge per learning block				
Type of test	1st 5LSs (Days 1-5)	2nd 5LSs (Days 6-10)	3rd 5LSs (Days 11-15)	4th 5LSs (Days 16-20)
Recall test	100 %	96 %	99 %	83 %
Recognition test	97 %	99 %	95 %	91%

Retention rates in the immediate productive recall test

Looking at the retention rates in the immediate productive recall test for words per block (5 days for each learning block), the results indicate a full retention rate (100%) for words learned in the first five learning sessions with a slight drop off in the middle (96% in the second learning block and 99% in the third learning block), and a steeper drop off towards the end of the learning sessions (83% in the forth learning block).

Although it was expected that the retention rates would be higher in the final learning sessions, due to the recency of learning, the results show the opposite, i.e. there was more drop off towards the end of the learning sessions than in the early learning sessions. This low retention rate can be explained in terms of the lack of enough learning trials given for words learned in the final learning sessions. The learning sessions came to an end after day 20 and the subject therefore had no opportunity to go back to the vocabulary learning cards.

Retention rates in the immediate receptive recall test

Results from the immediate receptive recall test show that there was a high retention rate in the first two learning blocks (97% and 99% respectively), with a slight drop off in the last two learning blocks (95% and 91% respectively). Unlike the results from the immediate productive recall test, the results here show high retention rates in the last block of the learning sessions which might be an effect of the recency of learning.

Looking at Fig. 2, one can hypothesize that learning recency is more effective only on receptive vocabulary knowledge. In contrast, productive vocabulary knowledge depends more on the time and the number of the learning trials rather than on the recency of learning.

Third research question: Is there any marked decay of productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge as indicated by delayed recall tests administered 10 days after the administration of the immediate recall tests?

Table 3. Number of correct translations at both retention tests

Type of test	Intensive productive vocabulary learning	
	Recalled words	Recognized words
Immediate test	283 (94%)	286 (95%)
Delayed test	149 (50%)	219 (73%)

Table 3 clearly shows that the subject in this study was really able to acquire almost all of the 300 words that she was required to learn productively as indicated by both immediate productive (94%) and receptive (95%) recall tests. However, this knowledge, whether productive or receptive, was only at best temporary as indicated by the delayed recall tests. Only 219 words were recognized in the delayed recall test compared to 286 words that were recognized in the immediate recall test. The situation is even worse with the productive knowledge, with just over half of the 283 words correctly recalled at the delayed recall test.

Discussion of the Results

In this section, the following points will be discussed: a) the findings of this study compared with previous findings in the reviewed studies above; b) the learning load and the performance of the subject as indicated in our second analysis, and c) factors that might have affected the retention rate in both tests.

a) The findings of this study compared to previous findings

In the present study, the overall retention rates in the immediate recall tests indicate that the subject got comparable, if not similar, scores in both tests—receptive (95 %) and productive (94 %). This was not the case in other studies. The results of these studies indicate that participants achieved significantly higher scores in receptive tests than those in productive tests (cf. Griffin and Harley, 1996; Waring, 1997; Schneider *et al.*, 2002). This is only true in our case when it comes to the delayed recall tests. The overall retention rate for the subject in this study was higher in the delayed receptive test (73%) than it was in the delayed productive test (50%).

Another case of similarities between the results of this study and previous ones is in terms of the effectiveness of the learning condition. The results of the present study indicate that productive learning has led to an extremely high amount of receptive knowledge. This is in line with the results of Mondria and Wiersma's (2004).

The present findings also show that the acquired knowledge decayed at different rates. As can be seen in Fig. 1 below, the productive knowledge was more susceptible to forgetting than the receptive knowledge as indicated by the participant's scores in the delayed recall tests. The retention rates of the receptive knowledge drops off from (95%) in the immediate recall test to (73%) in the delayed recall test, while the productive knowledge drops off from (94%) in the immediate recall test to (50%) in the delayed test.

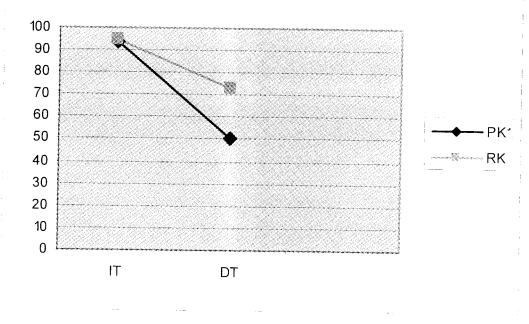

Fig. 1. Decay of retention rates.

Waring (1997) and Schneider *et al.* (2002) found similar results. They found that productive knowledge decayed faster than receptive knowledge. However, Griffin and Harley (1996) found that productive and receptive retention rates decayed at a comparable rate.

b) Learning load and the subject's performance

As reported earlier in this paper, our results showed that the learning task for our subject was relatively light, and the learning load of 15 words each day is a possible task over an extended period of learning sessions.

This goes against our expectation. Initially, our expectation had been that this learning load would make a learning burden that would cause the performance of the subject to deteriorate as the study progressed and the number of words increased. However, the subject of this study had no difficulty dealing with this level of input. This suggests that our design of the learning task has somewhat underestimated the ability of the subject to learn new words at this rate.

Figure 2 below shows the number of words which were correctly recalled or recognized in both immediate retention tests—receptive and productive–in the four learning blocks.

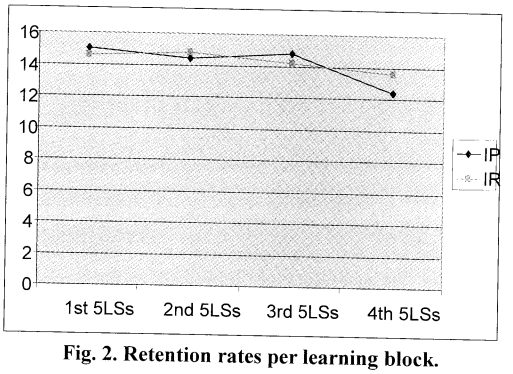

Fig. 2. Retention rates per learning block.

This graph clearly shows that words learned in the early learning sessions were more likely to be correctly remembered than words learned in the last five learning sessions. As can be seen, by the time we get to the last learning block, retention rate drops off to (91%, receptive) and to (83%, productive). It is clear here that this decline in the performance was not as sharp as one might have expected. However, it is not entirely clear whether to attribute this decline to the effect of the learning load or to the fact that these words did not have enough learning trails and rehearsal as the learning session came to an end in day 20.

c) Factors affecting retention rates

Before the learning session started, the subject was asked to keep a record in which she noted which words she reviewed and the type of the employed strategies. We were able, from these extensive notes, to identify some factors that have contributed significantly to the high retention rates in both tests. The notes indicate that: 1) words which had more learning and relearning trials were more likely to be recalled in the subsequent tests; 2) conscious mnemonic strategies were more conducive to high retention rates; and 3) shorter words were easier to learn than longer words.

These three factors, the number of encounters; mnemonic strategies; and the length of the word

correlated highly with the high retention rates of the learned vocabulary items ($p < 0.05$).

Implications of the Study

Two types of implications will be presented in this section: a) methodological implications, and b) pedagogical implications.

a) Methodological implications

Although single subject case studies are a standard methodology in the study of vocabulary acquisition in the first language, they remain rare and have not been exploited widely in second language vocabulary learning (Meara, personal communication, summer 2005). The task in this paper was a longitudinal study where the subject was required to learn a relatively large number of vocabulary items over an extended time period. Since we are dealing with a massive number of L2 words that ought to be memorized through consecutive learning sessions for 20 days, this study was designed to be a single case study. Meara (1995) argues that "detailed investigations using a co-operative single subject can sometimes allow us to research questions which are not amenable to experiments using large subject groups".

Using a single subject allowed us to be methodologically innovative in this study and we were able to investigate vocabulary learning in ways which would be very difficult to administer with a large number of participants. This study is hoped to be a good contribution to the small literature that employed a single subject in vocabulary learning research (cf. Horst and Meara, 1999).

b) Pedagogical implications

Our expectation of the difficulty of the learning load of 15 words per learning session was incorrect. The findings of this study suggest that this learning load is not difficult and average learners could reasonably, and maybe easily, learn vocabulary at a repeated rate of 15 words per day. Such a learning load for vocabulary can be followed in our classrooms. A minimum of 15 words per day can be introduced as a learning target for each learning session. This is not to neglect taking other factors into consideration, such as the age of the learners, the nature of the words, and the aim of vocabulary learning and the learner's strategies.

Another point that should be emphasized is the effectiveness and usefulness of productive vocabulary learning. It is highly recommended to employ this type of learning when productive and receptive knowledge is the aim of vocabulary learning. The results of this study show how effective this type of learning is, especially in the immediate recall test.

Conclusion

This paper reports on the results of intensive productive vocabulary learning sessions. It uses a single subject—a 41-year-old female native speaker of English. The subject was required to learn 300 hundred Arabic words at a rate of 15 words a day over an extended period of 20 days. The results support the positive impact of intensive productive learning as shown by the high retention rates in the immediate productive and receptive tests. Therefore, there are grounds for arguing that intensive productive vocabulary learning indeed merit a place in our classroom teaching.

The results also show that the performance of the subject in the learning task throughout the 20 learning sessions was better than we expected and was able to cope with the task, perhaps, easily. This should lead us to suggest that future research should be carried out in which the subject is required to learn more than 15 words in each learning session and for a longer period of time, i.e. more than 20 days.

Finally, the data obtained in this study should reinforce our belief about the value of single-subject case studies. Such studies should be exploited widely in work dealing with vocabulary learning.

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التعلم الإنتاجي المكثف للمفردات: دراسة حالة لمتعلمة للغة العربية بوصفها لغة أجنبية

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ملخص البحث. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة مدى فاعلية التعلم الإنتاجي المكثف للمفردات من ثلاثة أوجه: أولاً: من ناحية تأثير هذا النوع من التعلم على حصيلة المفردات بشكل عام بشقيها الإنتاجي والاستقبالي عن طريق اختبارات الاسترجاع المباشرة. ثانيًا: من ناحية تأثير هذا النوع من التعلم على أداء المتعلم وتأثره بذلك عند التعرض لمدخلات مكثفة للمفردات من خلال سلسلة طويلة من جرعات التعلم. ثالثًا: معرفة ما إذا كان هناك تراجع واضح في المحصلة المفرداتية المكتسبة من خلال هذه التجربة بشقيها الإنتاجي والاستقبالي كما توضحه اختبارات الاسترجاع المؤجلة.

وقد أشارت نتائج هذه الدراسة إلى فاعلية التعلم الإنتاجي المكثف للمفردات وتأثيره الإيجابي على الحصيلة المفرداتية عن طريق اكتساب المتعلمة المشاركة في هذه الدراسة حصيلة مفرداتية عالية متماثلة من حيث التعبير (الإنتاج) والفهم (الاستقبال) إلى حد كبير. وقد كانت معدلات الاسترجاع (٩٥٪ فهمًا) مقابل (٩٤٪ تعبيرًا). وبالنظر إلى أداء المتعلمة خلال مراحل التعلم المختلفة توضح النتائج استرجاع كامل (١٠٠٪) لما تم تعلمه خلال الخمسة الأيام الأولى من التجربة مع تراجع طفيف في مستوى الاسترجاع في منتصف الفترة (٩٦٪)، يقابله تراجع أكبر بنهاية الفترة (٨٣٪). كما بينت نتائج الامتحان الاسترجاعي المؤجل إلى أن الحصيلة الإنتاجية للمتعلمة هي أكثر عرضة للنسيان (٥٠٪) مقارنة مع (٧٣٪) عندما اقتصرت المعرفة المفرداتية على الفهم فقط.

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٢- شيك مصدق باسم (عمادة شؤون المكتبات – حساب الخدمات) يرسل إلى العنوان البريدي الموضح أدناه.
٣- حوالة أو إيداع على (حساب الخدمات رقم ٢٦٨٠٧٤٠٠٧٦ الرمز ٥٠١) البنك السعودي الأمريكي – فرع جامعة الملك سعود – الرياض ، وترسل صورة الحوالة أو الإيداع المختومة على الفاكس الموضح أدناه أو على العنوان البريدي.

قيمة الاشتراكات: الاشتراك السنوي داخل المملكة (٢٠) ريالاً سعودياً ، وخارج المملكة (١٠) دولارات أو ما يعادلها لجميع فروع مجلة جامعة الملك سعود ماعدا فروع (العمارة والتخطيط–علوم الحاسب والمعلومات–اللغات والترجمة) اشتراكها السنوي داخل المملكة (١٠) ريالات سعودية وخارج المملكة (٥) دولارات أو ما يعادلها.

جميع المراسلات على العنوان الآتي: عمادة شؤون المكتبات – جامعة الملك سعود – الرياض ١١٤٩٥ ص.ب ٢٢٤٨٠ هاتف ٤٦٧٦١١٢ (١-٩٦٦++) فاكس ٤٦٧٦١٦٢(١-٩٦٦++) E-mail: libinfo@ ksu.edu.sa موقع جامعة الملك سعود www.ksu.edu.sa

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قسيمة اشتراك بمجلة جامعة الملك سعود

تاريخ تعبئة القسيمة(بالتاريخ الميلادي): / / ٢٠٠ م

ملحوظة مهمة: لضمان وصول المجلة إليكم يرجى تعبئة الخانات المسبوقة بعلامة ❖

اسم المشترك(رباعي)❖: ..... اسم الجهة (للجهات الحكومية): .....

العنوان❖: ..... صندوق البريد❖: ..... الرمز البريدي❖: .....

المدينة❖: .....الدولة❖: ..... الهاتف❖: ..... الفاكس: .....

البريد الإلكتروني: .....

اسم المجلة المطلوب الاشتراك فيها : ..... عدد النسخ: ( ).

طريقة الدفع: ☐ نقداً ☐ شيك مصدق(مرفق) ☐ حوالة (مرفق صورة مختومة)

نوع الاشتراك: ☐ اشتراك جديد ☐ تجديد اشتراك ☐ اشتراك فردي ☐ اشتراك حكومي

مدة الاشتراك: ☐ لمدة سنة ☐ سنتان ☐ ثلاث سنوات ☐ خمس سنوات

☐ أخرى.....