

## Developing English Reading Skills among the Young Arab (Libyan) Learners

Emohammed Al-Beckay\* & Sathi Veerraghava Reddy

Department of English, College of Education, Sebha University, Libya

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### ABSTRACT

Reading is a skill, which everyone must have to survive in this world, and knowing how to read in English is a skill that is no longer useful only for English speakers. English has become the lingua franca of the world and without knowing how to read in English, survival in the world is going to be very difficult. This article is aimed at shedding light on the existing practices of teaching English reading skills to the young learners of the Arabic world with a special focus on the practices observed in Libya and thereby suggests effective ways of developing English reading skills among them. This study investigates the reading interests of the Arab students' reading interests in English, the obstacles hindering their reading efforts, the persons who help them choose their reading materials, the factors which determine their choice of reading materials and the reasons why they read. The identified factors that cripple the learning of effective reading skills include the challenges for Arabic learners of learning to read in the different script of English, limited access to English texts at home, lack of parental support, the lack of community support for English, and, most importantly, the inappropriate teaching approaches that are often used it is thought that this might limit their ability to decode new words. "Arabic-speaking nations have an unusually strong tradition of oral language" (Palmer, El-Ashry, Leclere, & Chang, 2007, p. 13), with reading aloud and recitation common practices. The reading problems like misunderstanding of the reading process, insufficient linguistic competence in general and practice of reading in particular, differences between English and Arabic and English spelling sound system are addressed in detailed. Finally this article stated some pedagogical suggestions to develop EFL reading skills among the young Arab learners using the Extensive Approach to reading.

Keywords: lingua franca, reading skills, young learners, reading process, linguistic competence

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### INTRODUCTION

Reading has been considered the most important of the four language skills (Koch, 1974). Therefore, various aspects of reading have been heavily investigated over the past years. Reading is also considered an essential skill by all types of people, and perceived as being vital for people's job prospects. Coming to the case of young Arab learners of reading English, it is necessary to understand the tradition of their oral language. In the history of education, the teaching of reading has been a principal focus for many years. Numerous research efforts are evidence of widespread interest in all aspects of the reading process, especially in the beginning stages of learning to read. Exact pronunciation has always been one of the key factors that determine the reading skills of the learners. Reading skills in this paper, initially, are not examined as the skills to grasp the meaning of the given text but as a skill of uttering sounds and words. Besides, the present study investigates aspects of young Arab students' reading interests, the main obstacles hindering their reading efforts, the main factors determining their choice of reading materials, the main reasons why they read, and the persons who help them choose their reading materials. Moreover, several researchers stressed the importance of feeding students' reading interests for encouraging them to read and use their reading skills.

\*Corresponding author: [beckay555@yahoo.com](mailto:beckay555@yahoo.com)  
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More specifically, the present study attempts to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the Arab EFL teacher–college students’ reading interests?
- (2) What are the main obstacles that hinder these students reading efforts?
- (3) What are the major factors that determine their choice of reading materials?
- (4) Why do the students read?
- (5) Who help the students choose their reading materials?

Ultimately, this paper suggests a novel approach to teaching English reading skills among the young Arab learners that is completely different from the traditional method. It is hoped that this method will be able to help young Arab learners understand and diagnose the methods employed in this paper.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

“Arabic-speaking nations have an unusually strong tradition of oral language” (Palmer, El-Ashry, Leclere, & Chang, 2007, p. 13), with reading aloud and recitation as the common practices. As these authors explain, Middle-Eastern children learn colloquial Arabic at home, followed by Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) at school, where their first lessons start with the alphabet. Arabic is a phonetically regular language, and the teaching of initial literacy focuses on phonics. Children are introduced to the relationships between sounds and letters and, once they have learned these, are able to read whole words through a process of *serial decoding*, which, as Emery (2005) points out, allows them “to correctly read aloud previously unseen words – something not always possible in English” (p.10). As a result, Arab children learning English, but dependant on the strategy they had employed learning Arabic, are likely to struggle with the unpredictable phoneme-grapheme patterns found in English. They therefore also need to be introduced to *whole-word reading*, and the skill of learning to recognize words as symbols. Indeed, research conducted by Fender (2003), who contrasted the word-level reading difficulties of Japanese and Arab students of a similar language level, found the Arabs’ problems related to word recognition.

## TEACHING READING THROUGH PHONICS

There are two basic views of reading instruction: the skills-based approach and the meaning-based approach. A skills-based approach emphasizes the use of phonics. Phonics is an instructional strategy that is used in order to teach letters and sound relationships by having the young readers sound out the words. This approach was influenced by the work of Chall (as cited in Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) who identifies reliable and substantial advantages to programs that include systematic phonics teaching. In fact, there has been extensive research on the effects of using phonics in teaching reading. In a recent study it has been declared that phonemic awareness is the key element of early success in reading where it was found that children's phonological awareness and phonological abilities play a vital role in learning to read (Anderson, 2005). In Libyan context, teaching reading through phonics plays a vital role in developing the reading skills of the students because a typical Libyan learner is under the great influence of his/her mother tongue in uttering certain phonemes like /p/. Here it is necessary to add one more pronouncing practices of the students in this region. They are highly habituated to pronounce the /ts/ sound as /tis/. For example, the word ‘cats’ is uttered as ‘catis’ by the majority. Hence it is an area of high importance as reading of any language starts from the basic sounds of that language.

In this approach, emphasis is placed on intensive phonics instruction that is highly sequenced, and where phonics is taught with the expectation that meaning will follow at a later stage. Skills-base approaches have received considerable attention, and somewhat less attention has been paid to comprehension. However, other researches reject the idea of teaching phonics with an emphasis on drills and rote memorization. In fact, intensive sequenced phonic instruction was widely used in the 1960s and 1970s, until some researchers attacked this approach and started to raise questions about sing phonics in isolation. It is likely, then, that using phonics alone is not the answer to improve reading skills and will not cure all reading problems. In later studies, educators were influenced by Goodman who asserted that readers count more on the structure and meaning of language, rather than on the explicit information from the content or text (cited in Samuels & Kamil, 1988). He also developed a reading model that is known as the whole-language approach. As opposed to those supporters of phonics, meaning-based approach supporters emphasize meaning and comprehension in texts. In this case, students focus on the wholeness of words, sentences, paragraphs, and entire books to get the meaning through the context.

There are, then, two opposing views on the teaching of reading, and this opposition could be related to the common but mistaken view that whole language and skills-based instruction are divided into two sharply distinguished parts (Samuels & Kamil, 1988). Therefore, recent studies have focused on using a combination of

phonics and the whole language approach in order to provide a balanced reading program. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) confirm that the teaching of reading needs solid skills instruction that includes phonics and phonemic awareness, along with whole texts to assist the construction of meaning. All in all, it seems that "Neither approach by itself is effective all the time, but both approaches possess merit" (Cromwell, 1997).

## **LETTERS AND SOUNDS**

Starting with the very basic of teaching reading, Anderson (2005) asserts that many parents and teachers believe that learning the letters of the alphabet is the key toward the process of acquiring literacy skills. In his study, he argues convincingly that teaching the names of letters to young learners who have just started to read and write can only lead to confusion, at the point where comprehensibility and clearness are crucial. He believes that problems arise when learners realize that letter names always differ from the sounds they typically stand for. Therefore, Anderson (2005) suggests using phonics, and yet there are problems related to misconceptions of teaching phonics where phonics is taught via the drill method. It reflects the belief of some parents and educators that young readers need to memorize the sound-symbol relationships of letters and letter combinations through repetitive drilling. In spite of these reservations, phonemic awareness is the key element of early success in reading.

## **COMBINING PHONICS WITH OTHER METHODS**

Researchers have pointed out that motivational problems might affect reading in the EFL context. Nuttall (1996) refers to readers who cannot develop good reading skills. She assumes that slow readers do not read much, and this affects their comprehension skills. If they do not understand, then they cannot enjoy reading. Therefore, foreign language researchers have focused their efforts on finding effective methods that increase students' enjoyment and reading rates as well. Jackson advocates the use of extensive reading to motivate readers. Brown (2000) defines extensive reading as an approach which involves reading widely, reading long texts, and reading for global understanding, and not for details. Thus, he claims, if students develop the habit of reading widely for enjoyment and interest, they gain increasing confidence and fluency and most develop the lifelong habit of reading in a Developing Young Learners' Reading Skills in an EFL classroom foreign language. However, this strategy was disputed by Jackson himself in a later study where he reported that a majority of students had a low level of motivation to read extensively; the challenges related to reading slowly due to the new words and the lack of time which discouraged students to read. Yet, we cannot generalize this research outcome to all second language learners, but what we can say is that in order to develop students' reading skills, there is a need to seek a balanced literacy program.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The following methods are used to collect data and analyze it with a view to arriving at fruitful results.

### *Observations*

The observation is the method which has been initially employed in the collection of data. According to Bell (1999), observing enables documentation and reflection on classroom interactions and events as they actually happen, rather than what we think occurs. Although this method may be time consuming, in fact it gave a holistic perspective on the situation being observed. In this study, observational checklists were used to answer questions related to the reading progress noted as the action plans were implemented. This method is employed in order to have an insight into the basic reading abilities among the young Arab learners of the Arab state Libya.

### *Interviews*

Interview is the second instrument that is effectively employed with the same aim to collect reliable data. Interviews provide very different data from observations. Macintyre (2000) defines an interview as getting information from the respondents through face to face interaction, and for this study an in-depth interview was conducted with the teachers in particular. This method is employed to get a clear idea about the reading practices followed both by the teachers and the students in Libyan schools and to suggest necessary recommendations in the recommendations section.

### *Surveys*

The third instrument of data collection used is the survey method. Burns (1999) defines surveys as a form of data collection where the same questions are asked to obtain information from a representative selection of respondents. This tool aimed to investigate students' attitude toward reading, and was used to conduct a self-evaluation of their reading ability, before and after using phonics in their classes. In getting feedback from the students in the class, the use of surveys had more advantages than using individual interviews, because using surveys was less time consuming and allowed me to gain responses from all the students in the class. To decrease the chance of bias and to increase the reliability of the tool, students were asked not to write their names, so that their answers could become more trustworthy.

## **FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

While undergoing the study, the following findings related to the reading skills among the young Arab learners are observed and duly analyzed through discussion

### *Existing practices of teaching reading skills*

The following are the existing practices of teaching reading skills. Reading activities are restricted to the teacher reading everything, including instructions, short stories, and rereading what was written on the board. Students' reading is confined to imitating flash cards and reading very simple sentences after the teacher. Students begin every day with a new letter, learning the shape and memorizing words that start with the same letter. Students decode unfamiliar words using letter names instead of sounds. Activities are all teacher-centered, and students memorize letter shapes and words.

### *Reading interest of Arab learners in English*

Reading experts believe that reading interests play a very important role in reading instruction and improvement. Furthermore, helping students learn through reading requires an understanding of their interests and abilities. Edgier (1999) claims that interest is a powerful psychological factor in learning. Moreover, the individual's reading interests are considered one of the major factors that determine what s/he reads, not to mention the importance for one's attitudes toward reading. The following are identified as the interested areas of reading among the Arab learners.

Stories, novels and poetry are observed as the students' interests as these subjects usually deal with different social, cultural, scientific, political and economical issues relevant to students' lives. They are easy to read. Newspapers and magazines are widely read because they are inexpensive and readily available. Many families buy them daily for the purpose of keeping in touch with what is happening around the world. Furthermore, newspaper world events were high among the students' interests probably because of the current political, social and economic problems in the region. Moreover, the sport sections of newspapers and sport magazines top the students' reading interests because it is a well-known fact that almost all the Saudi people are interested in sports. The technology revolution in the Arab region explains why the respondents show a high interest in magazines about computers and new advances in technology, and books about the internet and computers. Finally, picture magazines are light reading materials that need neither much time nor effort to read and understand. Reading materials about religion are also high among the students' reading interests. This is because of the fact that their parents instilled in them a love of God, the prophet peace be upon him, and Islam. Moreover, most of these students have been brought up in accordance with Islamic values. On the other hand, the students show a low interest in economics books, which may be due to the fact that the students are consumers rather than producers who do not usually participate in making economic resolutions. This result is consistent with those of Al-Kutob (1981) and Al-Shorman and Bataineh (2004), where economics found to be the least reported among students' reading interests.

### *Obstacles hindering the students' learning efforts*

The findings reveal that the main obstacles that hinder the student' reading efforts are rare visits to the library, inability to get books quickly, unavailability of reading materials, time constraints, lack of local libraries, beliefs of having better things to do than reading, difficulty of reading materials provided by English departments, beliefs that improving reading is not as important as improving other language skills, beliefs that there is no relationship between reading and other language skills, and lack of family interests in reading. The students are usually required to write reports and critiques, do research and presentations, prepare for the exams in addition to the social demands being made on them, which leaves no room for further reading and prevent them from visiting libraries so often.

### *Factors determine the selection of reading materials*

The findings show that the students choose their reading materials based on interest, teacher's request, the main character, length, literary quality, and cost. These findings are partly consistent with Reynolds (1996) and Al-Shorman and Bataineh (2004) who found that students choose a book by its title, author, writing style, topic, cover, characters, movie or television adaptation, interest and length.

The choice of reading materials is a motivating factor that, if given to students, allows them to take responsibility for their learning. The findings of this study have proved that the students have a range of reading interests on which they rely when choosing their reading materials. The name of the author allows the students to be confident in their ability because they are familiar with the author's work. The writing style is also an important factor in materials selection as the writing style makes the students feel involved in the action, not to mention the fact that one of the reasons why the students read is to improve their writing style.

### *Factors that encourage students' learning habits*

The findings reveal that the students have various reasons for reading which were found to include improving their language, learning something, improving their academic achievement, keeping in touch with the economic, cultural, scientific, local and political developments, improving their local status, keeping in touch with what is happening around the world, and entertainment. Moreover, students, who come from rural areas where there are no places in which they can spend their leisure time, resort to reading as a useful means of entertainment. Furthermore, it is noticeable that social factors and the enlargement of knowledge in the spiritual, artistic, sports or literary areas influence the students' motivations for and attitudes toward reading.

### *Motivators for choosing reading materials*

The findings show that the students depend on themselves, their teachers, and their friends for choosing their reading materials rather than on their family members. This is because most parents do not speak English or busy working, so they are not able to help their children choose the suitable reading materials. This can be concluded from the fact that most houses do not have libraries that provide family members with different types of reading materials which meet their reading interests. Brothers and sisters may have different reading interests, attitudes toward reading, age, or lower educational level; therefore, they may not be able to offer help. Accordingly, the students have to rely more on themselves, their teacher, or their friends for help in choosing their reading materials.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

After careful consideration of the findings, an experimental method was tested for the students in order to bring them out of their reading difficulties. The method is described here under. It can be tested with any learners who need to develop their reading skills successfully.

### *Significance of teaching phonics*

Initial observation showed that most students in the class had the same reading difficulty, which was not being able to Developing Young Learners' Reading Skills in an EFL classroom decode words phonetically. The results were consistent with Anderson's claim that teaching students only the letter names when introducing print causes problems in later stages when students start to decode print without realizing that letter names always differ from the sounds they typically stand for (Anderson, 2005). However, after teaching the sounds of the letters, it is observed that the learners in the class revealed a gradual disappearance of this. Before implementing this action plan, 90% of the students called out letter names when trying to pronounce words, especially unfamiliar ones. After three weeks of the implementation of the teaching of the sounds of the letters, students started to realize that they could use the sounds when decoding, and thus they began to develop an ability to read unfamiliar words. Finally, the percentage of students in the class using the letter names, rather than sounds, to decode words reduced to just 10% of the class. In later stages, students' reading ability significantly improved. Feedback from the class teacher revealed enhancement in reading at sentence level which helped them to move toward reading at text level. An audio clip was recorded while students were decoding an unfamiliar whole text with many unfamiliar words. It showed that students used a phonemic approach to decode as the following transliteration of one student's decoding attempts demonstrates:

*Student:*

I liky bananas, kokes and oranjes,  
Tomatos, apis and sundwishes,  
bef birgars, letoocees, barad and kaaarots,  
yame, yame, I liky to et.

*The original text:*

I like bananas, cookies and oranges,  
Tomatoes, apples and sandwiches,  
Beef burgers, lettuces, bread and carrots,  
Yummy-Yummy, I like to eat.

It is clear that the student here was trying to sound out the letters, and to read and enjoy the song. In fact, the class teacher declared during the in-depth interview that “It was quite impressive observing students’ progress from being unable to read unfamiliar words to trying to read at text level.”

All in all, the analysis revealed that teaching phonics seemed to produce significant benefits for students in Grade Three. By contrast to the other Grade Three sections in the school, students in the examined class enhanced their ability to read and spell words. The examined class was better able to decode and spell, and showed significant improvement in reading. Furthermore, it seemed that when students mastered the skill of sounding out letters, fear of reading difficult or unfamiliar words seemed to decrease. An answer to a question in a questionnaire I completed by the classroom teacher revealed that: “They were able to read words; even if they don’t have meaning, students started to read difficult words.” It is also observed that the learners or more interested in group learning than in isolation.

*Pedagogical Suggestions*

It seems that different approaches and/techniques based on the Extensive Approach to reading, along with class instructions to develop skills and strategies are enough to solve our students’ problems.

*Motivating the students*

The first step that teachers should take is motivating their students by creating a humanistic teaching/learning environment. Students can be informed that problems in reading might exist, but there are ways of solving them, and this might be more important than teaching the meaning of specific words, phrases, and concepts (Bliock, 1992). Physical punishment should be avoided. Teachers must create within each classroom a positive atmosphere, a way of life conducive to promoting reading through positive affect.

*Right method*

It is well known that Arabs like to recite the Quran loudly and word by word. In addition, being taught by the Grammar-Translation method, Arab EFL students tend to be analytic and seem to benefit from the phonics approach. However, such a reading style might fit short reading assignments, accomplished in a short period of time, and require slow reading. This can be problematic when students are confronted with huge amounts of prints, especially when entering a university. Therefore, what I suggest is building on this style and dedicating part of each class time for interesting silent reading, skimming, and scanning followed by group discussions.

*Spelling/sound system Vs. Phonics approach*

While knowledge in the spelling/sound system is helpful to those who need it (Templeton, 1991), the crux here is how to provide this knowledge. Is it by the phonics approach or by explicit teaching of the spelling/sound rules? It should be known that phonics rules vary, are numerous, and difficult to memorize. Instead, both fluent reading and the phonics rules can be taught by practicing reading and writing. Through keeping journal entries, the students can be given feedback of their development. It is recommended that students in each class read each other’s journal, which I think, will create fluent readers.

*Techniques to avoid specific problems*

Occasionally, specific techniques can be used to solve specific problems. For those related to consonant clusters, teachers can write down examples on the blackboard and divide them in the areas of difficulty. For instance, consonant clusters such as in 'Chomsky', 'against', 'constitution', etc., can be divided as chom-sky, again-st, cons-titution.

The next step is to ask students to read repeatedly each word as if it were two. Then, students in each time can be asked to speed up their pronunciation till the two parts become one word. Problems related to individual letters can be solved by using minimal pairs, nonsense pairs, and minimal sentences. For instance, to teach students how to distinguish between [p] and [b], minimal pairs such as pan/ban, pen/ben, and Pack/back, are useful when students are asked to read them loudly and tell the difference. Nonsense words are more useful since teachers feel free to create as many words as they can to show the difference. When teaching the difference between [f] and [v], teachers can use nonsense pairs such as fat/vat, far/var, sefen/seven, etc. However, it is much more effective when these problematic sounds are taught in context such as in the following minimal sentences:

- I bought a *van* because my car is small.
- I bought a fan because it is hot today.

Such a technique will be useful if students find themselves in a humanistic language-rich environment in which they read and write as much as they can. Undoubtedly, they learn to read by writing and by reading their own writing

#### *Characteristics of the Extensive Approach*

Reading as much as possible, book after book, where the meaning is the focus, students select their own readings, students cover a variety of materials and topics, students read for pleasure, information and general understanding, reading is its own reward, reading materials are within the range of the students' linguistic competence, reading is individual and silent, reading speed is usually fast, reading teachers are guides and facilitators, and teachers are role models of a reader for students. This approach can be very beneficial and rewarding to student readers. When teachers function as guides and facilitators in the Extensive Approach, they actually integrate different reading approaches together in their instructions to maximize their students' reading comprehension. They might use different techniques from different approaches such as bottom-up, top-down, skills and strategies, etc. Therefore, teachers need to be instructed on how to use instructional models to be creative, but not to get stuck on only one.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although the reading problems of Arab EFL students vary and their reading competence seems to be below the threshold level, the techniques mentioned above might make a change. With collaborative efforts from teachers, students and administrations, it is possible to develop students' reading skills and strategies in order to give them the chance to be independent readers who, after being trained, will take the responsibility for their own learning.

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