TEACHING ENGLISH READING TO ARABIC-SPEAKING STUDENTS

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Teaser: What makes reading in English different from reading in Arabic? What linguistic features from both languages contribute to the difficulty of the task for Arabic-speaking students of English? How can we deal with that reality? When teaching reading, what approach can we adopt to minimize the difficulty level? This paper attempts to answer some of these questions.

Keywords: Reading, Arabic-speaking students, writing system

Introduction

Among the four language skills, reading could be considered the most important one since it can improve the overall language proficiency (McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Krashen & Brown, 2007). Indeed, even the reading skill itself can only improve through much practice, eventually resulting in a change in the direction and purpose from learning to read to reading to learn. In one word, reading can be defined as a process. When applied to a second language, this process can be a continuous one of struggle, which may last with the student for as long as they are learning their target language. This is especially true when the writing system of L1 is vastly different from that of L2, as is the case with native speakers of Arabic learning English. As compared with native speakers of English, a student might be lagging behind in a number of reading components, including accuracy, comprehension, and speed. But the issue here is not lack of motivation on the part of the students; rather, as pointed out by Alsamadani (2008), it is a cognitive difficulty associated with the process of reading in another language. Alsamadani asserts that Saudi students, for example, have generally “positive attitudes” towards English and reading, but still lack the necessary comprehension skills.

Teaching reading to ESL students (i.e. fluency development) is different from teaching it in the first language (i.e. literacy development). Furthermore, between “meaning-focused input” (i.e. understanding the message) and “language-focused input” (i.e. paying attention to textual features), the focus of teaching is also different. The former is almost synonymous with what is called “extensive reading” whereas the latter is a way of using “intensive reading” (Nation, 2009). Taking this into consideration, teaching the reading skill is the topic of this article. Arabic-speaking students of English are the target population in mind. In the article, I will first touch on some of the major issues related to reading such as the schema theory as borrowed from cognitive science. Secondly, I will discuss the main differences between reading in L1 and L2. The next section moves to a more specific account of the major challenges, problems, and issues faced by Arabic-speaking students by virtue of their L1. In an attempt to overcome these challenges, I recommend the “holistic approach” as a model to adopt when teaching reading to the population at hand. The final section will, therefore, give a brief account of the approach in question before I explain why it is appropriate and useful.

Major Reading-Related Issues

The schema theory

Developed in the 1970s, the idea behind this theory is that beside the textual features of the given text, background knowledge adds to the element of comprehension - for an overview of this theory, see McVee, Dunsmore, and Gavelek (2005) and An (2013).
Understandably, this element is lacking when students read in L2, especially at the beginning stages. While the answer to such questions as “where” and “when” can easily be extracted from the text, answering questions beginning with “why” or “how” require more cultural knowledge (Drucker, 2003). The common belief is that this schema can be “recovered” by means of activities such as brainstorming, skimming or discussion questions (Wallace, 2001). The “why” and “how” questions, for example, can generate discussions among the students before the teacher plainly gives the necessary information here. Alternatively, to compensate for this lacking element, we can choose texts that reflect the culture of the students in the classroom - a technique that has been proven effective for better understanding and comprehension of the reading texts, particularly with beginning students (Drucker, 2003; Palmer, El-Ashry, Leclere, & Chang, 2007). Indeed, previews can work well even if they were done in the native language before reading the English text (Chen & Graves, 1998).

Extensive reading (ER) vs. intensive reading (IR)

A major difference between extensive reading (ER) and intensive reading (IR) is that the former is typically done outside the classroom whereas the latter inside the classroom. While ER is characterized by rapid speed and large quantities, focusing on meaning and aiming at improving fluency (Carrell & Carson, 1997, as cited in Renandya & Jacobs, 2002), IR, by contrast, is more structured and controlled, with shorter texts and a more focus on textual features (e.g. vocabulary and grammar) and a goal of improving comprehension skills (e.g. identifying the main idea) (Nation, 2009). Therefore, while ER is suitable for relaxation and pleasure, IR fits better for instructional purposes (Harmer, 2001). And while students choose the material for ER, the material for IR is “teacher chosen” (ibid.). Finally, since ER lacks the element of grading and the pressure of testing, the text material should be within or below the proficiency level, in contrast with IR, whose text material should conform to Krashen’s Input Hypotheses (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). No doubt, both types of reading are useful. Each has its own place and is suitable for particular groups depending on the proficiency level and students’ needs.

The relationship between reading and vocabulary

This is one of nine points discussed by Grabe (2002) and described as “dilemmas.” Vocabulary intersects with reading in such issues as “incidental learning,” “extensive reading,” “reading fluency” and “comprehension level.” Current studies are almost in agreement that for an effective outcome of reading, knowledge of no less than 98% of the vocabulary used in a text is required on the part of the students (Schmitt, Jiang, & Grabe, 2011). This is because L1 speakers, by comparison, come to know an average of about 40,000 words by the end of secondary school (Grabe, 2002). While this is very difficult to achieve in L2 within a short time, the good news is that this knowledge of vocabulary can merely be at the recognition level, not necessarily the production level. Extensive reading can have some positive effect on increasing vocabulary size (Grabe, 2014). The question remains: When is it most appropriate to explicitly present new words? Would that be before, during or after reading?

Cautioning against making vocabulary part of the pre-teaching activities as it will “create a cognitive load that splits the learner’s attention,” Yeung (1999, as cited in Drucker, 2003, p. 27), suggests that this can be done during the reading stage by way of integrating a glossary of words within the text at hand. This was echoed - with another recommendation - by Sonbul and Schmitt (2009). In their article, they tested the retention of the target words among forty Saudi students against three levels of vocabulary knowledge (form recall, meaning recall, and meaning recognition). They conclude that what they term “Read-Only” (i.e. incidental learning) is less effective than “Read-Plus” (i.e. explicit instruction) in both vocabulary retention and reading proficiency, asserting that vocabulary knowledge requires several encounters presented both during and after a reading passage.

Strategy instruction

Parallel to the issue of incidental/ explicit instruction in vocabulary teaching is another one concerning the use of learning strategies. The issue is discussed at a general level in several articles, including Oxford (2002), who questions whether “blind” training in strategies (i.e. refraining from explicitly telling students about strategies) might be more effective. At a more specific level, Krashen and Brown (2007) discuss the issue as applied to academic proficiency, inquiring whether strategies should be taught or learned. Taking a middle stance on the issue, they believe that while some strategies can be taught, others (e.g. the use of mnemonic for vocabulary learning) should not, because they would lead to mere surface learning rather than deep acquisition.

When this is applied more particularly to the reading skill, the same concern arises. Grabe (2002) argues that “we have to make students into strategic readers rather than teach them reading strategies” (p. 281). In agreement, Janzen (2002) suggests that strategies can and should become “strategic behavior” rather than simply “rote skill learning” (p. 292). We can achieve this, she continues, by asking students to reflect on the
strategies they used and write down how effective they thought these strategies were.

The need to pose questions of the sort is understandable when we know that strategies might have little to do with achievement. Alsamadani (2008), for example, found no positive relation between the use of reading strategies among Saudi students and their comprehension level. However, he made an important distinction between awareness of strategies and their effective use. Perhaps this short article is not the appropriate place to discuss such a broad question, but when attempting to answer it, it would probably be wise to first define what exactly the word “strategy” means, so that it can be distinguished from other similar words such as “skill,” “ability,” “capacity,” “task,” and “technique.” My position regarding this issue of strategy training (both in the reading context and beyond) is that all aid resources should be made available to students, especially at the beginning stages. This is even more so when reading strategies can function as solutions to solve problems related to comprehension (Duffy, 1993).

**L1 and L2 Reading Differences**

The relation between reading in L1 and L2 is rather complex. The effect of the L1 on reading in L2 can be of various natures. Similarities between the two processes exist, as do differences (Grabe, 2014). For one thing, in L1 we learn to read (i.e. literacy development), whereas we - try to - read to learn in L2 (i.e. fluency development). We can think of similarities and differences between the two processes based on several factors including time, motives, needs, goals, attitudes, proficiency level, and cognitive skill (ibid.).

Under normal circumstances, children start coming into contact with the language in print at an early age (about six or seven) – well within the realm of the “critical period.”. They are exposed to a variety of text types. The four skills are integrated far more naturally in L1. A story, for example, can be told to a child by their parents before it is discussed again (sometime later) in class, where the child is asked to talk or write about it (Nation, 2009). Nation maintains that the environment and teaching techniques are, therefore, also different: tasks are generally more fun in L1; attitudes are more positive; and the degree of enthusiasm towards reading is probably higher, too. Combined, these factors result in better linguistic knowledge in L1 - in terms of vocabulary size and grammar control - and better experience - in terms of appropriate schemata and genres.

The question then becomes: How much of that sound knowledge in L1 is useful when one starts reading in L2, and are reading strategies learned through L1 transferable to an L2 context? The general answer is positive. Supposedly, a “solid base” in L1 leads to “subsequent ease” in L2 (Palmer et al., 2007, p. 11). The Common Underlying Proficiency Theory (CUP), put forward by Cummins (1981, as cited in ibid.), states that a certain degree of generalization can apply to the reading process across all languages. According to this theory, skilled readers can benefit by using the same skills they use in their L1 (i.e. “positive transfer”). Nation (2009) agrees with this. He believes that such skills as using dictionaries and speed reading, among others, can positively affect reading in L2.

Drukecker (2003), on the other hand, notes that the strategies involved in reading in each language might not be the same and that transferring those strategies from L1 into L2 is not a “mapping process” (p. 22). This statement rings true once we take into account the writing system factor. Depending on the writing system of the L1, there seems to be a permanent effect on the reading habits of the individual, impacting several variables including reading fluency, word recognition, and language processing. As put by Green, Hammond, and Supramaniam (1983), “the left to right processing [for example] of letter strings does become more established with age” (p. 11). What influence does this have on the L2?

Generally, the more distant the writing system in L1, the less smooth the transition to reading in L2 is, regardless of how many strategies are used previously (Bassetti, 2006). In other words, a transition from a non-Roman alphabet (e.g. Arabic) to a Roman one (English) takes a longer time than a Roman to another Roman one (e.g. English to German or vice versa). Likewise, the transition from a non-alphabetic system (e.g. Chinese) to alphabetic one (English) is also of difficult nature, causing the gap between the two languages to be wider. This is a contributing and influential factor by itself. Based on this alone, difficulties are to be expected. Then there are cases that are language-specific. Linguistic features of Arabic, for example, lead to psycholinguistic difficulties endured specifically by Arabic speakers wanting to learn English. This is the topic of the next section.

**English Reading Difficulties Caused by Arabic**

Useful summaries discussing differences between English and Arabic can be found in Palmer et al. (2007) and Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic (1983). In this section, I will only account for features that are relevant in contributing to the difficulty of reading English texts by Arabic-speaking students. To start, Arabic writing goes from right to left. This has a bearing on the reading skill in that some learners target their
eyes directly to the right side of the words when reading in English. Ryan and Meara (1991) conducted a test among Saudi students showing two presentations of a set of words: the first presentation shows the full version of the given word whereas the second presentation shows the word with a missing vowel. Students were asked to simply locate this missing vowel. Not surprisingly, students scored higher in locating the error in words like sufficient and photograph (missing vowels underlined) than in words like department and distribute (missing vowels underline), simply because in the first two words the missing vowels are at the extreme right (ibid; Randall & Meara, 1988).

Secondly, the phonological system of Arabic has only six vowels: three long and three short. Only the long ones are represented by letters. The short ones are represented by diacritical marks for young children learning to read until about grade six, after which time those diacritics are usually understood by context. Though this feature has a minor effect on the efficiency of reading in Arabic, it would appear to be responsible for a huge portion of the problem Arabic speakers are facing when reading in English. Students - because of this - tend to heavily rely on consonants and overlook vowels, transferring the Arabic pattern into English texts, and mistaking words like circuit and mountains for, respectively, cricket and moments (Ryan & Meara, 1991).

Thirdly, Arabic words are described as having a “trilateral-root model.” In other words, the meaning of most of words can be attributed to their root, which mostly consists of three letters, less often of four, and to a lesser degree of five letters. For example, the root KTB (which has the basic meaning of write) can be combined with different patterns of vowels to give, among other words, kitalaba (he wrote), yaktabu (he writes), kitab (book), maktab (office), and maktaba (library). The effect, again, is wrong perception of vowels and difficulty in distinguishing between similar words such as pulls and plus. Interestingly, as pointed out by Ryan and Meara (1991), while students might produce incorrect vowels, the consonantal underlying pattern (PLS, in this example) almost always remains intact in such cases.

Finally, in contrast to English, Arabic is described as having a “shallow orthographic structure;” meaning that it has a systematic relationship between sound and symbol. Though this might be considered an advantage on the part of the language itself, it actually puts Arabic speakers at a disadvantage when starting to move to another system, causing different sorting of words and slow processing rate (Randall & Meara, 1988). The move is surely smoother from deep to shallow (e.g. an English student learning German) than from shallow to deep (an Arabic speaker learning English), because in the latter case, constructing a relationship between sound and symbol seems to be “too much information” to process (Ryan & Meara, 1991, p. 533).

To verify such findings and eliminate the possibility of this being a result of language incompetence rather than L1 background, Randall and Meara (1988) tested a different type of Arabic-speaking informants from Algeria, with different language proficiency levels, finding mostly the same results: native speakers of Arabic process English words differently from native speakers of English. Indeed, according to the first study mentioned above (Ryan & Meara, 1991), Arabic speakers - due to their L1 - have different processing patterns even from other groups of non-native speakers of English.

### A Holistic Reading Approach

The unique challenges faced by Arabic-speaking students of English require an approach that addresses different levels of learning how to read. I believe that the holistic approach serves that purpose. Put simply, this approach looks at reading as a whole process rather than as a subset of skills. Teaching decoding, for example, does not qualify as teaching reading, according to this approach (Nist, 1985). The approach is discussed in the context of L1 in Nist (1985) and in the context of L2 in Swaffar and Arens (2005). It takes into account major elements such as text selection, the length of the text, the number of words, the level of familiarity and interest of the students (Swaffar & Arens, 2005). Other factors that this approach takes into account are readability, coherence, and consistency of texts. It also employs visual aids such as charts and diagrams. When selecting texts, sensitivity towards the cultural context of the students (in terms of age, for example), academic background, learning levels, and their plans are all elements that are acknowledged. Finally, it supports the use of the L1 when necessary.

The approach goes through three mains stages of learning that, based on Swaffar and Arens (2005), are summarized here (see table 1). First, **pre-reading** at this stage, students are mentally prepared for reading the text. They move from a very broad level to specific; from comprehension to production; and from listening to speaking. A comparison can be drawn at this point between L1 and L2. With a limit of no more than ten, new words can be introduced here. Such basic questions like “what,” “when” and “where” are discussed at this level. Second, **initial reading:** at this less controlled stage, students are to identify the “macro issues” of the text (e.g. main setting) and familiarize themselves with its boundaries. Attention is to be paid to titles, pictures, and the initial paragraphs. In a way,
this stage is similar to the “traditional skimming and scanning strategies” (p. 72). Third, re-reading: this stage is in fact divided into three parts that are gradual in difficulty: “reproducing the textual messages,” “expressing the textual messages” and “creating the longer discourses.” In the interest of oversimplification, however, I am dealing with the three parts as only one. At this stage, the focus goes beyond language to content; tasks extend the recognition level into the production level, where both the writing and speaking skills are employed. Tasks include, for example, diary entries or oral presentations.

Table 1. The three stages of a holistic reading approach as modeled on Swaffar and Arens (2005).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Skill(s) Targeted</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-reading</td>
<td>- Gradual move from broad to specific and from comprehension to production</td>
<td>Listening &amp; Speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Answering “what,” “when,” and “where” questions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Initial reading</td>
<td>- Identifying the “micro issues” such as the main setting</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Paying attention to titles, pictures and initial paragraphs</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-reading</td>
<td>- Focus on content rather than language</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Focus on production</td>
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</table>

### Conclusion

Teaching reading is never an easy task. The concept is very wide and the issues surrounding it are numerous. From the discussion above, it is obvious that a student population of Arabic speakers needs emphasis on the word level, explanation of both the graphemic pattern and morphological system of English, and extra exercises on vowels. In hope that this could help in improving both the reading skill and other language aspects, students should also be made aware of the fact that the English spelling is different from Arabic in that it is unpredictable, and that English words are different from Arabic in that they are formed in a different way.

Other approaches and suggestions might be just as effective, but the holistic approach to reading outlined above seems to be able to serve those needs and more. I am recommending it because it starts at a basic level, gradually moving from language to content and culture. Furthermore, it acknowledges that acquiring reading proficiency takes a long time and thus requires patience on the part of the teacher. As in L1, it also attractively integrates the four skills through its three stages: listening and speaking in the before-reading stage; reading in the while-reading stage and writing in the after-reading stage. Finally, it acknowledges the sociocultural background and links between the individual and the community.

### Author Bio

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