

Key Findings from Research and Implications for the Classroom

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Home Literacy Practices

Students from the Arabian Gulf often lack the habit of reading (Kandil, 2001; Shannon, 2003). Although some refer to this culture as an oral culture, perhaps a more accurate description is a non-reading culture. In a fascinating ethnographic study, Jazzar (1991) explored the lives of six male and female students, three who were strong students of English and three who were weak students of English at the United Arab Emirates University. He looked at several dimensions in the home environment including available literature in the home library. He found that the three strong students had the most books and the most books in English. The top scorers on the pre-study English test had 40, 25, and 30 (total=95) books in English and their low-scoring counterparts had 20, 15, and 8 (total=43) books. In addition, the top three scorers in English had 68, 82, and 57 (total=207) books in Arabic while their low-scoring counterparts had 60, 43, and 45 (total=112) books.

The scores that the students made on the English and Arabic tests were related to the number of books they had in the home (Jazzar, 1991). The greater the number of books in the home, the higher the scores on the tests that Jazzar gave to the students in both English and Arabic. In addition, he wrote that the literacy environment in the home provided the strong students with broader and deeper general knowledge. The total number of books the strong English and Arabic students had in their libraries at home was 302 versus 191 for the weak students and they spent almost twice as much time reading, 91 hours per week versus 49 hours per week (Jazzar, p. 162). Surprisingly, in Jazzar's study, the weakest students had the most luxurious homes, the most cars, and the most servants. In contrast, the strongest students had bigger home libraries, more pieces of literature in Arabic and English, and spent more time reading.

A subsequent study by Taylor (2008) found that 42 students out of 102, or 41%, answered on a self-reporting questionnaire that they spent no time reading in English outside of class during a 16-week period. A further 49 students, or 48%, reported that they spent three hours or less reading in English outside of class. Therefore, a total of 89% of students reported that they spent 3 hours or less reading English outside of class during a 16-week period.

The implication of the research on home literacy practices in the UAE is clear: if students do not have books and do not read at home, this must be rectified during class time. The most important thing English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers can do with their students during class time is read because students do not read sufficiently outside of class to develop their reading skills. Moran and Williams (in Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 3 cited in Shannon) say that despite the universal acceptance of the idea that one becomes good at reading from reading, very little class time is actually spent on reading. It is important for teachers of Emirati students to spend class time reading extensively and reading for pleasure, because what teachers spend most of their class time doing is what students will think is the most important.

Students' Reading Preferences

Diploma program teachers at Abu Dhabi Women's College (ADWC) have discovered that students' most preferred way of reading is to follow along with their eyes as the teacher reads or an audiocassette/CD is played that reads the text aloud. The experience at ADWC of having students write graded reader book reviews as an initiative to increase extensive reading, which is by definition reading for pleasure outside the classroom (Davidson & Williams, 2005), resulted in many students copying answers from others doing the same course, or from a previous cohort (Consolati, McTaggart, & Wheeler, 2008). Teachers surmised that students were not able to read on their own and extract meaning. Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) for the students had not been successful as the teachers soon realized that some of the students did not understand what

they were reading or could not read in English, that is, they could not match the graphic forms of words to known words in their mental lexicon. SSR at the initial stages of reading does not allow for the occurrence of grapheme/phoneme connectionist brain-mapping that is instrumental to learning to read in English (Amer, 1997) or any orthographically deep language. Instrumental, because it is this phase of being read to aloud by a care-giving adult, either an elementary school reading teacher or parent, that is necessary for successful reading acquisition in native speakers of English as evidenced in numerous studies done in English on low socio-economic status (SES) students when compared with their non-low SES peers (e.g. Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002). Consolati et al. found upon surveying 352 students out of approximately 400 across the Diploma program (low-intermediate to intermediate levels) at ADWC that, when asked their preferred method of reading (teacher reads, reading with an audiocassette, silent reading, students read in groups/pairs, or students reading aloud), 41% responded “teacher reads” and 37% responded “tape,” which means that 78% of the students surveyed prefer being read to by a fluent native-speaking (or native-speaking proficiency) reader. In addition, Amer (1997) wrote that the teacher reading aloud “helps readers to see reading as a continuous, meaningful process” rather than an isolated word-decoding process (p. 44).

In support of students’ reading aloud, Gibson (2008) reports that that L1 readers who come from a logographic background apply a visual strategy to reading which may help them in the short term, but will not be as efficient in the long term as the acquisition through practice of alphabetic and morphemic principles. Reading aloud forces students to make and practice accurate connections between graphemes and phonemes that is vital in word recognition and pronouncing and learning new words in English. Gibson found that 82% of the autonomous learners in her study read aloud to as part of their private study similar to Stevick’s 1989 (as cited in Gibson) study of seven particularly successful learners that used reading aloud as a learning technique.

Further evidence of the benefits of students listening while a proficient reader reads to them as they follow along and students’ reading aloud in class comes from Alfalasi (2008). In her study, Alfalasi describes a successful buddy reading project in Fujairah, UAE. In buddy reading, a more proficient reader (i.e. an older student, parent, or teacher) reads to another person (a child, younger student, or adult) who cannot read as well. It is an extensive reading activity in which the more proficient reader reads while the other person listens and the less proficient reader reads while the proficient reader supervises the reading and helps if there are any difficulties.

The implications of this research are that Arabic students should read aloud more and be read aloud to by a proficient reader more often in class. The ADWC Diploma reading initiative asked teachers to read aloud to students or play an audiocassette or CD of a graded reader text for 10-15 minutes every day.

Reading in Arabic

Whenever Arab learners read in Arabic, they almost always read intensively versus extensively (Kandil, 2001). (See Davidson & William, 2005 for a discussion on the difference between extensive and intensive reading.) Kandil recounts that if L1 Arabic students are given a text by an English teacher and told to read it quickly for gist meaning, the students will read the article slowly paying as much attention to detail as possible because they think the teacher is setting a trap of difficult questions for them. Kandil blames both L1 Arabic teachers and curriculum designers for this phenomenon. He wrote that throughout his long learning experience in the Arab world, he was never encouraged to read extensively in Arabic and in informal surveys with other Arabs he found the same to be true for them. He also wrote that even the novels and short stories that were part of the Arabic curriculum were taught intensively, with students reading each chapter very carefully and being prepared to answer as many as 30 comprehension questions on each with the goal of catching the student out. Kandil concludes that because of

the way L1 Arabic reading is taught, it has a lot of negative connotations in the Arab learner's mind that include negative associations with words such as 'assessment,' 'grades,' 'points,' 'wrong,' and 'punishment.'

Another significant factor influencing the teaching of reading in ESL to Arabic speakers is the phenomenon of Arabic diglossia (Kandil, 2001; Saiegh-Haddad, 2004). Arabic, in its literary or classical form, is different from the colloquial or everyday spoken form. The two written forms of the Arabic language, Classical Arabic (CA), which was the language used to write the Quran, and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which was a modernization of CA that occurred in the 19th century, contrast significantly with the colloquial dialects spoken by the different groups that make up the Arabic world. These colloquial languages are known as Spoken Arabic Vernaculars (SAVs). SAVs, MSA and CA are far removed from each other lexically, phonetically, and grammatically and this has caused several researchers (e.g. Abu Rabia & Taha, 2006; Maarmouri, 1998; Saiegh-Haddad, 2004) to assert that learning how to read and write in MSA is akin to learning a second language, a language that the student does not hear being spoken because the home colloquial dialect is the language heard. Informants have reported that in the past, many cartoons and Arabic news shows were broadcast in MSA, but nowadays more and more are broadcast in the colloquial dialect of the target audience. Maarmouri wrote, as an example to explain the effects of Arabic diglossia i.e. learning to read and write Arabic is akin to learning to read and write in a second language, that when learning to read and write in Arabic, teachers show children a picture of a fish, known as 'huut' ('whale' in MSA) in their SAV, and teach them that the picture/word is now a 'samak,' 'fish' in MSA.

The implications regarding the affects of learning how to read in L1 Arabic on reading in L2 English are clear. First of all, according to Kandil (2001) and Shannon (2003) students should be encouraged to read on a regular basis so that reading becomes a habit, preferably inside the classroom because their home literacy practices reveal that they do not have very much literature at home and do not read at home very much (Jazzar, 1991; Taylor, 2008). Secondly, Kandil suggests that teachers should not ask L1 Arabic students detailed questions all the time about what they read. Adult native English speaking readers are never asked a myriad of detailed questions upon the completion of a book. In addition, Kandil recommends that teachers should consider changing the way that English reading is taught in traditional ESL methodology (intensively) and the way it is assessed (intensively). For example, both Kandil and Shannon suggest that students can be asked to respond to or evaluate a text rather than answer questions on the text.

Word Recognition in English and Arabic

There have been few studies on L1 Arabic students' ability to decode words in English. The few studies that have been done show that L1 Arabic learners use clearly identifiable L1 processing devices such as whole word recognition strategies and have difficulties in pre-lexical ESL word recognition (Beland & Mimouni, 2001; Brown & Haynes, 1985; Fender, 2003; Hayes-Harb, 2006; Randall & Meara, 1988; Ryan & Meara, 1991). The studies indicate that the ESL reading comprehension difficulties experienced by native speakers of Arabic result from deficient letter and word identification, or 'bottom-up,' processes (Birch, 2002; Koda, 2005). Brown and Haynes found that Arabic speakers were both slower and less accurate than their Japanese and Spanish counterparts when being administered a visual discrimination task that measured both accuracy and speed with a same/different matching task of words, pseudo-words, and nonsense letter strings. Randall and Meara's study compared errors and reaction times in a same or different word/pseudo-word task for Arabic speakers in English and Arabic and determined that the Arabic learners were relying on visual processing rather than grapheme/phoneme processing because the Arabic learners' reactions times on words were similar to their reaction times when they were shown same or different shapes rather than words. Ryan and Meara also compared Arabic

speakers with non-Arabic speakers in a same/different word/pseudo-word task and found that the Arabic group produced a significantly higher number of errors and had significantly slower reaction times. Their study also indicated that L1 Arabic learners rely on visual L1 reading processes when reading English words and concentrate on the position of the consonants at the beginning, middle, and end of words rather than on the position of vowels. This caused the researchers to hypothesize that Arabic learners suffer from what Ryan (1997) termed 'vowel blindness' although a subsequent study by Hayes-Harb found no significant difference whether the missing or misplaced letter was a vowel or consonant. Beland and Mimouni's unique case study on an individual who suffered a head injury which caused deep dyslexia in French, which is orthographically similar to English depth-wise, and Arabic, found that there were a large number of letter reversal errors in Arabic such as 'qird,' 'monkey,' for 'qidr,' 'cooking pot.' Because these letter reversal errors were not observed in French, the researchers concluded that "the Arabic consonantal trilateral root system constitutes a privileged unit of access to the Arabic mental lexicon" (p. 118).

In a study done on 143 Arab children aged 8 to 11 which included both strong and weak readers, Abu Rabia (1995) found that the visual task showed significant relationships with the orthographic and spelling task, which the author took to mean that visual-orthographic processing skills in reading Arabic are language-specific and cannot be transferred to English orthography. In the visual task, participants had to select whether a word was spelled correctly or whether it was a pseudohomophone. Abu Rabia (1995) surmised that visual processes develop at a very young age to compete with phonological reading processes in Arabic. In addition, the weaker children in the study accessed meaning more through orthographic features, visual word recognition, and less through phonology. The author concluded that Arabic orthography, with its trilateral root system, made it easier for poor readers to identify whole words and access meaning through visual processes, similar to Japanese and Chinese readers who use a logographic (symbol) script. In addition, the researcher proposed that Arabic learners who are weak in reading their own language are more reliant on a visual reading strategy rather than a phonological one, which is similar to the effect of dyslexia in native English speakers.

A second study by Abu Rabia and Awwad (2004) investigated how Arabic readers read Arabic words. They hypothesized that the subjects would decipher the words by affixes and suffixes and focus on the root to access lexical meaning. The participants were 48 grade-eleven and twelve, literate Arabic students, aged 16 to 18. The researchers discovered that, in all four experimental conditions when priming with root patterns in a lexical naming task and a lexical decision task, the Arabic students were using whole-word recognition strategies to access lexical meaning, rather than grapheme/phoneme strategies. The researchers concluded that the results of the study were "that the nominal derivational morphology is represented in the mental lexicon as separate whole words, and the nature of the morphology exerts no influence on the process of word recognition" (p. 332).

The conclusion of Abu Rabia's (1995) and Abu Rabia and Awwad's (2004) studies were that Arabic readers use uniquely whole word recognition strategies when reading Arabic. If researchers assumed that Arabic learners read phonetically because Arabic learners have what some researchers (see Randall & Meara, 1988; Ryan & Meara, 1991) claimed to be an orthographically shallow language, the assumption might have been incorrect because adult readers read in an orthographically deep language, that is Arabic written without the diacritics that indicate the short vowels. In Abu Rabia's (2002) model of reading, unique to the Arabic reader when reading unvowelized texts, the reader's eye identifies the trilateral or quadrilateral root of the word, which conveys general lexical access and gist sentence comprehension. The reader is not obliged to use phonological information for exact lexical retrieval purposes as is the case in English (i.e. Coltheart's Dual Access Route Theory, 2006). If Arabic learners do not transfer an auditory grapheme/phoneme decoding process to English, the problem when teaching English reading to adult Arabic students is that adult Arabic students depend on whole-word recognition strategies for achieving lexical access rather than a phonological strategy.

Many native English speakers who learn Arabic transfer their English grapheme-phoneme reading strategy to Arabic, but the inverse is not automatically true, that native Arabic speakers transfer an Arabic grapheme-phoneme reading strategy to English. In fact, research indicates that native Arabic speakers do not use this strategy to access the lexical retrieval of Arabic words (e.g. Abu Rabia, 1995; Abu Rabia & Awwad; 2004).

Further evidence of this unique access system in Arabic is anecdotal, but most ESL teachers of Arabic students have similar stories. Once, a student with more than 6 years of English instruction in secondary school and a year of instruction in a UAE government tertiary institution repeatedly pronounced the word 'character' (in a book reading project) as the known word, 'chapter,' even after being explicitly taught the pronunciation. The student practiced and applied the correct pronunciation on the first occasion in which the word was mispronounced. However, on the second occasion that the learner came into contact with the word the following day, the student reverted to 'chapter' and made no attempt at self-correction. The student seemed to be guessing the pronunciation of the word, 'character,' as the known word, 'chapter,' based on the first three letters 'cha,' without attempting to sound out the word. Other words that students have misread are 'abroad' for 'aboard,' 'claps' for 'clasp,' and 'communicate' for 'commitment.'

The case of Arabic learners and their written mistakes in which vowels are often missing or in the wrong place with the consonantal word structure relatively intact have also been highlighted by Ryan (1997). For example, Ryan described Arabic students writing 'sprt' for 'separate' or 'pulls' for 'plus.' These errors are very similar to the partial alphabetic phase described by Ehri (2005). In the partial alphabetic phase, readers form connections between only certain sounds and letters usually the beginning and ending of words. For example the 's' and 'n' in 'spoon' allow them to read the word 'spoon,' but they can easily confuse it for the word 'skin.' The partial alphabetic phase might be the phase at which Arabic learners become stagnant because of first language interference, especially if the Arabic readers have not passed through a reading aloud phase and been overtly taught phonics, as is the case with successful native-English speaking child readers. Phonics is a method of teaching elementary reading and spelling based on the phonetic (system of sounds) interpretation of the spelling of a language (Liben & Liben, 2004).

The main implication of the research done on word recognition for L1 Arabic students in English and Arabic is that students may not be sounding out words when they encounter words that are unknown in their graphic form for the first time as native English speakers do. One possible classroom implication is that explicit phonics instruction should be incorporated into the curriculum for native adult L1 Arabic students. Research by Perfetti, Beck, Bell, and Hughes (1987) showed that explicit knowledge of the phonological structure of spoken words, that is, phonological awareness, is necessary for learning to read. Recent studies have continued to highlight the significant role of early phonics training for academic success in reading English for both native-English speaking children and children who speak English as a second language (e.g. Cho & McBride-Chang, 2005; Lesaux & Siegel, 2003; Stuart, 2004). Slavin and Cheung's (2003) meta study of best practices in effective reading programs for English-language learners indicated that phonics was the most significant teaching methodology. Al Mehairi's (2006) action research study demonstrated the enhanced effect of phonics instruction on word attack strategies in English amongst ESL Emirati primary school pupils. Despite the research conducted on L2 printed word recognition, very few studies mention the pedagogical implications resulting from their studies and not one of the studies attempted to determine how instruction in strategies and skills used by native readers of the target language affected the development of non-native readers of L2. Strategy modification due to phonics instruction in L2 word recognition research remains largely unexplored in adult learners (Lukkarila, 2004). However, a research study done on the Get Reading (2006) phonics instruction website showed that students using the website in addition to regular ESL reading teaching methodology improved in their English phonological awareness (Taylor, 2008). The research also showed that some participants, who were adult Emirati learners, scored '0' on a phonological awareness test despite having ESL for 6 years in the UAE secondary school national curriculum.

Conclusion

To sum up, four key findings from reading research that apply to L1 Arabic adult Emirati students are:

1. Students do not read extensively in English or Arabic very much at home,
2. Students prefer to be read aloud to in the classroom,
3. Students have a negative experience in learning how to read in Arabic because of the intensive reading nature of how L1 Arabic reading is taught and because of the phenomenon of Arabic diglossia, and
4. Students use whole word reading strategies when learning to read in English due to Arabic interference because they have not been explicitly taught English phonics and they have not been able to develop grapheme/phoneme connections in English the same way that native English speakers have by being read to aloud by a caring adult and reading aloud in English as part of the process of learning to read in English.

The classroom implications for these findings are:

1. L1 Arabic adult Emirati students should read aloud and be read to aloud extensively (for pleasure without too many tasks or questions) preferably in the classroom because of home literacy practices which are generally poor in terms of access to reading material and because research suggests that they do not read very much at home.
2. L1 Arabic adult Emirati students should be given explicit phonics instruction either as part the curriculum or as an adjunct to traditional ESL reading methodology including for example the phenomenon of silent letters, with the teacher indicating ad hoc when letters are silent in words such as 'castle,' 'foreign,' and 'island.'

Research suggests a two-pronged approach, an approach that includes extensive reading via graded readers (because students need to understand 90-95% of the words in a text to make the text comprehensible according to Nation, 2001). Secondly, overt phonics instruction either through the use of a pronunciation text such as *Headway Pre-Intermediate Pronunciation* (Bowler & Parminter, 1992) or a phonics website such as *Get Reading* (2006), an approach that mimics the approach used for teaching native English speakers how to read. For teachers who are fearful of abandoning traditional intensive ESL reading methodology, a three-pronged approach, one that includes intensive reading, extensive reading, and overt phonics instruction may be best.

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