Reading Habits of Young Emirati Women from the East Coast

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The Arab Reader is Dead!” proclaimed a life-size gravestone above a mock grave at the Beirut International Book Fair a few years ago. Hyperbole though this may be, there is certainly widespread concern among Arab intellectuals that Arabs do not read. This view is shared by many English teachers in this part of the world, although some (such as Williams, 2006) warn against assuming that it is true for all Arab learners.

Individuals differ in their approach to reading based on their personal experiences at home or at school as well as their cultural background (Aebersold & Field, 1997; King, 1986). An important feature of teaching is to be sensitive to the cultural patterns of foreign students (Patil, 2007). Singhal (1998) relates this specifically to the teaching of reading, saying “it is therefore important that teachers know as much as possible about the cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds of their readers since many of these factors influence reading in an L2 context.”

Therefore we attempted to ascertain how far the prevailing stereotype of a non-reading Arab is true of our students at Fujairah Women’s College. In order to gain insight into the reading habits in their L1 and how much reading they have been exposed to in their daily lives while growing up, we distributed a questionnaire to all students in the 2008 cohorts of Diploma Foundations and Higher Diploma Foundations (482 respondents in all). We also carried out supplementary interviews with six students. This article firstly discusses the idea that Arabs do not read, and then presents the results of our survey. Finally it makes brief suggestions of some areas to consider when developing a reading programme.

Readers No More?

Publishing in the Arab world, it seems, is in decline. Print runs of new titles are half what they used to be, according to publisher Maher Al Kiyali talking on a recent Al Jazeera television programme which discussed the state of literacy in the Arab World (Pathways, 2005). Dr Sulaiman Abdul Moneim of the Foundation for Arabic Thought (cited in Moheet, 2008) suggests that the rate of reading in the Arab World is a mere 4% that of reading in England, pointing out that the Arab World publishes one new title for every 12,000 citizens each year, a far cry from the book for every 500 citizens published in England. And there is worse; author Sajid Al Abdali (cited in “Average reading per person in the Arab World,” 2008) claims that the average Arab spends only 6 minutes a year reading.

Several reasons have been put forward for this apparent lack of reading. One caller to the Al Jazeera programme mentioned above gave support to the idea that we are now moving to a post-literate culture, saying “to be honest, [books] are not my primary source of information...[they're] probably third, after television and the Internet.” This opinion was shared by another caller, who noted that books become out-of-date fast when compared to the Internet and television. Another caller lamented the fact that in the Arab World there are no published bestseller lists as there are in many other countries, and there is little in the way of publicity of new titles. As a result, people are not encouraged to read new books. A fourth caller voiced the opinion that for most Arabs, reading is not a lifelong activity; rather it is simply a means to an end and when formal education stops, so too does the need to read. This purely instrumental view of reading is confirmed by an Emirati acquaintance of the authors; when a friend told him he wasn’t going out one evening but was staying home to read, this man expressed great surprise: why would anyone want to stay home and read? Although highly educated (he holds a PhD), now he is no longer studying, he does not read by choice.
Al Tamimi (cited in Pathways, 2005) suggests that one reason for the lack of extensive reading on the part of Arab citizens is the emphasis on rote learning in the school systems; independent reading is not encouraged (in fact he goes so far as to say that it is discouraged). Ayish (2008) puts it this way:

The problem, according to a recent study, is that many education systems in the Arab region take too narrow a view of literacy as a mechanical text-centered process of translating print into speech. The goals of literacy instruction have become too focused on basic decoding skills, limited to and achieved during the first few grades of primary education.

Yet another often-cited reason for low reading rates is the poor quality of books available. Ibrahim El-Moallem, the head of the Arab Publisher’s Union, says that this begins at school. “Textbooks in most of the Arab countries are a means of torture for students. They are very badly written, very badly illustrated, poorly printed, too long and tedious” (cited in Al Malky, 2004).

Our Students

The picture thus painted is bleak indeed. But how far does this apply to the incoming students at Fujairah Women’s College? Are we to assume that they come from families where little reading takes place, and that they themselves rarely read? Well, the results of our survey show that a typical Foundations student has a 50% chance of having at least one illiterate parent (and around a 20% chance of both parents being illiterate). She may perhaps have had someone read her stories when she was a child, but this could have been as rarely as once a month. She herself learned how to read around the age of 6. Not counting her college work, she reads for 2 hours or less each week. She never goes to a bookshop and rarely visits a library other than the college library; if she does, she is unlikely to actually borrow any books from there. She is more likely to read the Qur’an than any other reading material, but does also read fiction books, magazines, and poetry. She says she likes reading, but only “a bit.”

Our written questionnaire, administered in Arabic, contained 4 demographic questions and 10 questions about different aspects of students’ reading experiences both past and present (see the Appendix for the English translation of the questionnaire). The follow-up interviews which we carried out in English and Arabic with six students asked for more detail on the same areas than was possible for a questionnaire to elicit. In the following section we will look at first what the respondents said about reading in the home while they were growing up, then their own attitudes to reading. We will go on to discuss the reading material they prefer and how often they read.

Reading in the Home

Given the widely documented importance of the home environment in developing literacy, if our students grew up in homes where reading was not a commonplace activity, then they will have been disadvantaged in developing good reading habits themselves. We therefore asked our students whether each of their parents could read. Just under 51% said that both their parents could read. 20.7% said that neither parent could read; 11.2% have a mother who can read but a father who cannot, and 17.2% have a father who can read but a mother who cannot.

We also asked how many of our students had stories read to them as children. While around 40% of our students said they were never read to as children, about 60% report someone reading to them. In some cases (17.5% of all respondents) this was a daily event, 29.3% said they were read to every week, and 13.5% said they were read to around once a month only.

One student we spoke to in an interview, Mona, explained that when she was a child there were no children’s story books available. Now there are, and her younger siblings bring these home.
from school. During her schooldays, however, all she would bring home were worksheets with literal comprehension questions. These were to be completed at home, and the expectation was that a family member would help them with any difficulties (they were, for example, not expected to be familiar with all the vocabulary since they were, in effect, learning to read in a second language – Modern Standard Arabic – which differs both lexically and syntactically from the spoken varieties of Arabic). Mona’s parents are both illiterate, and she relied on an older sibling. She said that where there were no readers in the family, students were forced to take private lessons from the schoolteacher.

Attitudes Towards Reading

One question asked our students whether they liked reading, giving the choices “Yes, a lot,” “Yes, a bit” or “No.” The good news is that the vast majority of our students say they like reading at least to a certain extent; as one student, Maryam, explained, “reading is my friend. When I have free time, I read.” Just under half (44.6%) indicated that they enjoyed reading a lot, although just over half (52.9%) said that they only liked reading a little. A mere 2.5% admitted to not liking reading at all.

Rasinski and Fredericks (cited in Colker, n.d.) say that “[a] literate home environment doesn’t teach children how to read; rather, it provides children with opportunities to enjoy reading and discover the many ways it can be used to enrich the experiences in their lives. Our follow-up interviews confirmed the importance of the home atmosphere in developing a positive attitude toward reading. Students whose parents read a lot say that they themselves now spend a lot of time reading. Nouf explained that she loved reading because her mother, who is a university professor, regularly read to her while growing up. “I like reading because my mother read to me a lot, but my friends do not like it because their parents didn’t read to them,” she said.

Wafa, like Nouf, also believes that her reading habits were formed at home. “You learn from the environment. I mean if your father reads and people in the house read, you read. My sister reads all the time and she makes me read too.” In contrast, Shaima pointed out that both her parents can read but cannot write. When asked if she liked reading, she replied “so so. Only if it helps my imagination.”

Reading Matter

We asked students to identify the type of material they read (in addition to the requirements of their college courses). Our findings show that most students (89%) read the Qur’an, and a very large number (84%) read magazines (although one interviewee, Mona, believes that many students are more interested in the pictures than the text). Short-stories and novels are also popular with nearly three-quarters of students (74%). Many (69%) also report reading poetry. Nearly half our students (48%) report using Internet chat rooms, and a similar number (46%) stated that they read newspapers. Mona said that her elder brothers used to read the paper daily, although she admits that now it is only read in her household at the weekends.

Although during the interviews several of the six interviewees indicated that they enjoy reading “true stories,” the results of the questionnaire showed that the least favoured reading text was non-fiction with a percentage of only 16%.

Therefore it seems that our students enjoy a variety of reading experiences, which is good news when it comes to transferring reading skills to a classroom situation. As Nisbet and Shucksmith (cited in Williams & Burden, 1997) point out, most of us rely on what we know, avoiding the need to learn by sticking to familiar routines. Khoury and Berger (2005) suggest that if a learner’s main experience of reading is recitation, they will transfer these skills to any kind of reading.
and assume that they will be successful - when in reality, the kind of reading expected of them at college may well be quite different, requiring a whole new set of strategies. While the reading of the Qur'an and of poetry (where every word is important, and the sound of the words fundamental) are popular among our students, so too are magazines and fiction writing which are likely to require a wider range of reading skills than just bottom-up/local processes.

**Time Spent Reading**

When we asked the students how much time they spent reading in addition to their college work, 8.1% said that they never read anything other than coursework. Just over a third (35.2%) said they read for an hour or less each week, and around the same number (35.8%) said they read between 1 and 3 hours a week. Since their foundations programme requires very little in the way of reading outside class, this does not represent a lot of time spent reading, and would seem to confirm the finding that many of our students like reading only “a bit.” Some students on the other hand are more avid readers; 11.4% read for 3.5-7 hours a week (or between half an hour and an hour each day), and 8.5% read an hour a day or more.

Where do they get the books that they read? Results showed that more than half of our students (60.5%) do not buy books. 52.9% never even visit a bookshop. 11.9% said they visited a bookshop once a year, 22.3% between 2 and 5 times a year, 2.7% between 6 and 11 times a year, and only 10.2% visit a bookshop once a month or more often.

Although around a third (35.2%) of students said they never visited a library, a larger number (64.8%) report visiting a library at least occasionally. Of these, 17.6% go only once a year; 30.4% go between 2 and 5 times a year; 7.1% go between 6 and 11 times a year, and 9.6% go once a month or more often. However, students who visit the library do not necessarily borrow books. 68.9% of respondents said that they never borrowed library books (statistically around half of these students will visit a library at least once a year, though). 2.9% of the students said they borrowed one book a year, 18.3% borrowed 2-5 books a year, 5.3% borrowed 6-11 books a year, and only 4.6% borrowed 12 or more books a year (the equivalent of one or more a month).

From these results, we were not expecting our interviewees to have recently read a book. However, we were pleasantly surprised when Nouf said that she purchased a book only last week. She buys 6 to 8 books a year. Aisha, when asked what the last book she read was, picked up a book she was carrying with her and said “this one!” So the idea that students do not buy books or read at all outside their study requirements is clearly, at least in some cases, false. Amnah, on the other hand, said she had not read a book for about a year.

**Conclusion**

Our findings are far from damning, and suggest that our students read significantly more than 6 minutes a year! When one considers that only half of our students come from households where both parents were literate, and that probably only 10% of their parents went to college or university (Williams, 2006), this generation has come a long way in comparison to their parents’ generation. Are we there yet? Well, change does not happen overnight. But these students, almost all of whom say they enjoy reading at least a little (and half of whom say they enjoy reading a lot) will hopefully pass on their attitudes and what they have learned from their experiences to the next generation bestowing on them the advantages of a literate home environment and thereby further boosting reading skills across the country.

What does this mean for us as educators? Firstly, we suggest that we need to challenge our assumptions, whether positive or negative. We should not assume either that our students do not read outside the classroom, or conversely that they possess a range of reading skills and are able to deal competently with the reading matter we expect them to in an academic environment.
If we assume that they are not exposed to any amount of reading outside the classroom and generalize this to the whole student body, we will be underestimating those who actually do enjoy reading. On the other hand, if we assume that all students come from environments similar to our own, then we are assuming that they go through the same processes we do as readers. Secondly, we recognize a need to build positive attitudes towards reading, because students’ previous reading experiences may not have been good ones. Thirdly, we should attempt to develop intrinsic motivation – to encourage our students to see that reading is not a means to an end - it is a lifelong activity which brings rewards of its own. Finally, we suggest that we can use reading matter which is of interest to our students. By looking at the material which they choose to read in their first language, we can help them access similar material in English.

References


Appendix

Questionnaire (English version)

1. How old are you?
2. Where do you live?
3. How many years of English did you study at school?
4. Which languages do you speak at home?
5. Can/could your mother read?
6. Can/could your father read?
7. What do you choose to read? Please tick all which are true for you:
   - The Qur’an
   - Fiction books
   - Non-fiction books
   - Magazines
   - Newspapers
   - Chat rooms/discussion boards on the Internet
   - Poetry
   - Other (please specify)
8. What do you think of reading? Please choose one:
   - Like it a lot
   - Like it a little
   - Don’t like it
9. How many minutes/hours do you read (outside college) each week?
10. Do you buy books for yourself? If yes, how many each year? What kind of books are these?
11. How many times a year do you visit a bookshop (not a stationery shop)?
12. How many times a year do you visit a library?
13. Do you borrow books from a library? If yes, how many each year?
14. When you were a child, did anyone read stories to you? If yes, how often?