Ten Essential Elements for Reading Programs in Arabic L1 Contexts

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Introduction

‘Teaching reading’ may be viewed in some contexts as a series of intensive reading lessons focusing on ‘text attack’ skills, with a supplementary extensive reading program consisting of the reading of a series of graded readers at increasingly high levels. This is a view perhaps arising from teacher-training courses which claim to have world-wide applicability, and it is supported by books on teacher development such as Scrivener (2005). However, in the Arabic L1 context, this approach is inadequate. Here, there is a widely acknowledged problem in relation to teaching reading that requires a more comprehensive and determined teaching approach. In this article, the problem is stripped back to its roots, with an attempt to answer the question, ‘What special features does an Arabic L1 context imply for the teaching of reading?’

The answer proposed is a multi-stranded approach consisting of ten core ‘elements.’ Before these can be identified, the key abilities or skills (‘keys to success’) that are required for successful reading, and the particular problems encountered by Arabic L1 learners, are described below.

The separation of reading instruction into ten elements facilitates the use of a checklist, which individual teachers and departments can use for their classroom practice to identify which elements are already covered, and which may need to be introduced. At lower levels, it is suggested that all ten are necessary, while at higher levels tests for each of the ten elements could be given to determine whether they continue to need addressing and if so, at what level and with what priority. Activities supporting the elements can be listed next to each, providing a record and enabling the development of a bank of activities. The list can be shared with students, allowing teachers to link a particular element explicitly to reading; in the case of an element such as learning high-frequency vocabulary, its perceived value would thereby be enhanced. As mentioned above, it may be possible or necessary to create new activity types to cover the elements, which is a positive feature of the approach.

Reading Well: Four Keys to Success

In order to better understand the perspective of an L2 reader of English, we can imagine experienced English L1 readers – ourselves, perhaps – with no medical training, reading an article in a specialist English medical journal. Such readers would be likely to encounter difficulties analogous to problems encountered by an L2 reader who lacks any or all of the following four critical ‘keys’ to successful reading.

Key 1: Effective top-down strategies
First, effective ‘top-down’ strategies such as the use of prior knowledge and the consequent ability to predict content are needed for successful reading. A reading purpose can lead to an interaction with the text, as the reader ‘negotiates meanings’ and relates to the writer’s viewpoint.

Key 2: Efficient ‘bottom-up’ decoding
There is a raft of ‘bottom-up’ processing problems of English texts that lower-level L2 readers encounter, such as the need for virtually instantaneous word-recognition skills, decoding ability, and the application of lexical and grammatical knowledge. In addition, an excess of unknown vocabulary, for example, can be a major barrier to text comprehension.

Key 3: Fluency and reading speed
Readers who lack speed, or the fluency that enables reading at speed where appropriate, can be overly aware of the process of reading, and the limitations of working memories may be
exposed. Such readers cannot focus sufficient attention on an understanding of the themes of the text, thereby preventing them from a normal appreciation or enjoyment of the text.

**Key 4: Positive affective factors**

Poor readers may also lack motivation, especially if they do not find the reading tasks they attempt purposeful, which is a danger of classroom reading activities which do not have an authentic, recognizable purpose beyond the development of reading skills. For the lower-level L2 reader, this is likely to be a very common problem, which may not be sufficiently compensated for by that reader’s general awareness of the overall benefits of reading.

For ease of reference, these four keys will be referred to as K1-K4.

**Special Considerations for Arabic L1 Learners**

In addition to the four keys to reading which L2 readers must have, the Arabic L1 reader, particularly in the Gulf region, may have some or all of the following problems to deal with. Although they may to an extent overlap with the four keys, they are particularly relevant in this context and therefore worth explicitly stating here. They include:

a. a lack of a developed reading culture (in either L1 or L2) resulting in a low motivation to read for pleasure or for other purposes
b. a lack of ‘world knowledge’ and of knowledge which relates to English language reading material
c. a lack of automaticity in vocabulary recognition including recognition of very high-frequency words
d. the ‘distance’ between English and Arabic, which have radically different writing systems, grammar, and vocabulary
e. the inherent difficulty of the English spelling system, which is often not compensated for by basic English literacy training at all schools

These special considerations will be referred to as SC(a) – SC(e). The proposed teaching program elements below are intended to address the four keys K1-K4 as well as these special considerations SC(a) – SC(e).

**The Ten Essential Elements**

Ten elements to include in a reading program in an Arabic L1 context such as the UAE are identified. For each element, a working definition (as opposed to a strictly academic one) or description is given, a justification for why it is needed in a reading program, and one or more examples of pedagogical activities that can be used to develop the element. In some cases, original activities are given. Indeed, it is hoped that a result of this multi-element approach will be to encourage practitioners to find creative new ways to achieve the reading goals, facilitated by the clarity the system brings.

**Element 1: High-frequency vocabulary**

*Working Definition/Description.* Whilst vocabulary (words and lexical items) in general is clearly important for reading, high-frequency vocabulary is of central importance. By high-frequency it is meant those words that are most commonly used, and which are therefore most likely to be encountered. Various lists exist, such as the General Service List, the GSL 1000
Bauman adapted list (Bauman, not dated) used in the materials described below.

**Justification.** “The most fundamental requirement for fluent reading comprehension is rapid and automatic word recognition (or lexical access – the calling up of the meaning of a word as it is recognized)” Grabe and Stoller (2002, p. 20).

It has been shown that 98% of the vocabulary in a text needs to be known for independent understanding (Hu & Nation, 2000). The first 1000 words constitute over 70% of an average text, and the first 3000 words 84%, the minimum for processing authentic texts, according to Nation, (2001). Together, these facts point to the central importance of a focus on high-frequency vocabulary as a pre-requisite for successful reading.

Addressing this issue is relevant to K2 and SC(c).

**Example activity.** ‘Gary’s High Fives’ is a vocabulary memorization system based on the idea that our working memory can only comfortably accommodate up to seven items simultaneously (Russell, 1979). Anecdotal evidence suggests that Arabic L1 learners may favor rote-learning, perhaps as a result of high-school pedagogy and Koran memorization experience, in which case it may be motivating to adapt it for ELT methodology. The system was designed as a principled, effective rote-learning method. An advantage of this system is that spelling links between words (action/active, for example) become clearly visible to the students. However, the same system could be adapted for other groups of vocabulary items, perhaps topic-focused.

The GSL 1000 word list is divided into groups of 5 words (a number chosen as significantly fewer than the maximum seven), alphabetically, and a simple translation is given for each. The words are repeated a total of three times (twice without the translation). A card with a slot wide enough to reveal just one line of text is drawn down the page (Table 1). Learners first read and memorize a revealed row, then move the slot down and write the words from memory in the blank areas of the following row from memory, including the translations where given (after the first instance of each word). The memory load is increased line by line, starting with just one word; at the end of the group, all five words are memorized. Learners work through the 1000 words in groups of five, each time with three repetitions. An example of a five-word group is given here:

**Table 1. Gary’s High Fives - vocabulary memorization system**

| action | فعل - عمل |
| active | نشيط - فعل | actual | فعلی |
| add | جمع | address | عنوان | action |
| active | actual | add | address |
| action | active | actual | add | address |

With only five words to memorize in each group, the learner is able to hold them in working memory, and to ‘play’ with them, perhaps reversing the order, repeating them several times and so on. After two groups of five words, there is a test of all ten words.
Element 2: Grammar for reading

Working definition/description. This refers to the grammar and syntax that allows readers to extract the meanings from texts. Whilst all grammar and syntax is of course relevant to meaning, some areas are particularly crucial for reading. These include:

1. cohesive devices (ellipsis, conjunctions etc.)
2. pro-forms such as ‘this,’ ‘which,’ and ‘it’
3. noun groups with modifiers
4. the passive versus the active voice (understanding this tells us who did what to whom)
5. modality (to understand the writer’s attitude)
6. the perfect and continuous aspects of verbs, contrasted with pure tense forms

Justification. Some grammar is especially useful for reading, as it deeply affects meaning (this is a K2 and SC(d) issue). As Nuttall (1996, p. 78) explains, “it has to be faced that understanding texts is closely associated with understanding syntax...reading does require grammatical skills.” Those areas of grammar and syntax that are particularly relevant to the writing system may therefore be thought of as the domain of the reading teacher.

Example activity. Activities to develop awareness of the communicative content of grammar in written text will ideally make very clear to learners how the grammatical item affects meaning. An activity in which learners reconstruct a football results table by reading sentences some of which are in the passive voice and others in the active voice is an example; misunderstanding the grammar would lead to a very different set of results (see the partially completed example below):

1. Chelsea were beaten 4-2 at home by Sunderland.
2. Leicester were beaten 2-0 away.
3. Manchester United beat Leicester City.
4. Ipswich beat West Ham away.
5. West Ham were beaten 1-0.

Element 3: Intensive reading

Working definition/description. This element refers to focused classroom-based reading activities, using short texts. Nuttall (1996, p. 38) defines two types of intensive reading lesson: text-based lessons (trying to understand a text as fully as necessary, using all appropriate skills, determined by the task type) and skills-based lessons focusing on one particular skill, such as skimming, scanning, using reference words, and inferencing. For both types, a pre-while-post approach is usual.

Justification. Completion of tasks which engage the learners and encourage the replication of a skilled reader’s reading strategies will, it is hoped, enable the transference of those strategies to texts outside the classroom. It is possible that these strategies may become entrenched and
automatic, at which point they may be termed ‘skills’ (Grabe & Stoller, 2002, p. 15). These may
be in the area of K1 or K2, and SC(a) means that learners may not have readily-transferable
skills from their L1.

**Example activities.** There are many engaging and productive reading activities, such as
transferring information from text to table, following directions on a map from written descriptions
and so on. ‘PowerTeaching,’ is an original method of teaching using MS PowerPoint for various
teaching aims (Pathare 2008a). It can be used for reading to provide a motivating activity type
that is designed to help Arabic L1 learners engage more fully with the text. In this method, a
text is divided into paragraphs, and each one is put onto a slide on a PowerPoint presentation.
Questions are written onto slides inserted between these text-bearing slides. The PowerPoint
timer function is activated so that the slide transitions occur automatically, with the time set to be
challenging – perhaps 20 seconds for a paragraph, and 15 for a slide with two questions. The
learners must focus fully, as they cannot see the text and questions together – one proceeds
the other (in either direction – questions can be before or after the text, encouraging different
reading strategies). The entire presentation is set to loop continuously, using the ‘Slide show/
set up slide show’ function of PowerPoint, so that it repeats automatically, which means that
students have repeated exposure to the text. This lockstep activity works extremely well in
this context, with the presentation providing a strong visual focus. It is important that the font
is sufficiently large and the timing is set to the right degree of challenge, and it works best with
simple texts. Feedback, and focus on language points arising from the text, is facilitated by this
format, as the text is clearly visible to everyone.

A simple way to focus on inferencing is to use True/False/Not Given questions and setting Not
Given questions at the limit of an inference – in other words, to guide students to judge whether
or not a statement may reasonably be inferred from the text.

**Element 4: Speed and fluency development**

**Working definition/description.** Developing reading speed whilst being able to comprehend
the text is the goal here; in other words, becoming a more efficient reader. This involves physical
factors such as eye movement and vision, as well as mental processes.

**Justification.** According to Nuttall (1996), there is a strong link between speed, interest and
enjoyment when reading: in addition, “slow readers are likely to read with poor understanding”
(p. 54). This is because the processing components operate better when reading is rapid (Grabe

In addition to addressing K3, students can see and measure progress directly (unlike such skills
as skimming, scanning and inferencing) which is motivating (see K4 above). Experience here
suggests that this factor alone can generate great focus during activities used to address this
element. SC(a) and SC(b) may result in a lack of top-down skills required for fluency, such as
prediction and application of world knowledge.

**Example activities.** *Speed Reading,* by Quinn and Nation (1991), is a course which allows
students to measure their reading speed increases. PowerTeaching (see above) can also be
used to develop reading speed. Commercial software is available to improve the efficiency of
learners’ eye movements and decrease the number of fixations they make when reading.

**Element 5: Spelling and literacy development**

**Working definition/description.** Literacy has various meanings and connotations, but what
is referred to here is the ability to decode the spelling system of English, and to understand the
relationship between letters and sounds. This is intimately connected to the ability to encode, so
spelling is included in this description.
**Justification.** Spelling is a code, and all codes are reversible. Reading and spelling (decoding/encoding) are strongly inter-related and should be taught together. The ‘bottom up’ processing (K2) necessary for reading is impossible if words are not recognized or cannot be decoded: “... instructional programs that emphasize spelling-sound decoding skills result in better reading outcomes because alphabetic coding is the critical sub-process that supports fluent reading” (Stanovich & Stanovich, 1999, p. 29).

The spelling system of English is inherently difficult, as it has a fairly ‘deep’ orthography – that is to say, it breaches a one-to-one principle of sound/spelling correspondences (Cook, 2004, pp. 10-11), making it a challenge for all L2 learners whatever their L1. However, for Arabic L1 learners, the distance between the orthographies of the two languages are so great as to be overwhelming for many students. This can result in negative affective factors prevailing, with learners becoming convinced that there is no system or systems governing English spelling. If spelling is not systematically and effectively taught, these learners may find it difficult to master the decoding required for reading (or the reverse for writing).

**Example activity.** Phonics methods such those used in primary L1 education can be adapted for L2 teaching. For example, the author’s own Target Spelling Sounds system (Pathare, 2008b) is based on sorting activities for spelling/sounds correspondences. This systematically encourages learners to notice and recognize the sound/spelling correspondences in the most frequent 1000 words. All words in the GSL 1000 list containing the diphthong in ‘boy’, for example, are given to the students, who sort them into the two spellings ‘oi’ and ‘oy,’ at which point the rule that ‘oy’ is used at the end of a word (or morpheme in the case of employee) becomes clearly evident.

Words with oi: avoid, choice, join, point, voice
Words with oy: boy, destroy, employ, employee, enjoy

Being easy to use for teachers and learners, this activity it is suitable for use even when teachers have little knowledge or experience of teaching spelling, a serious consideration as spelling is not usually a component of teacher-training courses such as CELTA and DELTA.

**Element 6: The English/Arabic writing systems**

**Working definition/description.** The writing system of a language includes all the conventions of punctuation, paragraphing, and so on. Differences between the two writing systems need to be made explicit to students: for example, in English, but not in Arabic, there are capital letters that give you important clues when reading, for example to identify proper nouns.

**Justification.** If the differences are not made explicit, students may assume that the same rules apply, or not be able to use the information contained in the English system to help their reading. This is important ‘bottom up’ information. It is particularly necessary where there is such a great distance between languages, as is the case with English and Arabic - SC(d).

**Example activities.** This is possibly best taught through raising awareness of teacher and students. The habit of noticing features of the writing system needs to be developed. For example, the teacher can regularly encourage students to reflect on their own language compared to English. Translation backwards and forwards between the languages is a useful activity in this respect. A short English text can be translated by learners into Arabic. The first draft is likely to be stilted and ‘un-Arabic’ in some respects. Differences in areas such as generic conventions, textual organization and paragraphing, grammar, format, punctuation, vocabulary repetition (generally avoided where possible in English), pronoun use and register can be discussed. For example, in the Arabic translation, sentences may be shorter than is usual in Arabic, and begin with nouns (conventional in English but not Arabic), and the text may be over-paragraphed compared to Arabic. A second draft can then be written to take account of these differences.
As a continuation of this activity, it can be re-translated from Arabic to English (perhaps after a 48-hour delay to minimize memorization effects) and this translation compared to the original text. Where the teacher is not an Arabic speaker, their role can be to facilitate the noticing of differences through the comparative discussions.

**Element 7: Extensive reading**

*Working definition/description:* Extensive reading involves the reading of longer texts, where possible out of class time, with a focus on reading for pleasure. Graded readers currently appear to be the most popular materials for extensive reading, while newspapers can also provide some texts at a suitable level (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 100).

*Justification.* “We learn to read by reading,” the oft-quoted slogan attributed to Frank Smith (1978), is at the heart of the rationale for extensive reading programs. Extensive reading is often used to promote general English language development, for example for vocabulary and grammar acquisition, but it is also necessary for the development of reading fluency.

Nuttall (1996, pp. 127-8) claims that “we want students to read better: fast and with full understanding. To do this they need to read more…” She suggests that there is a ‘vicious circle’ for those who do not read extensively: the learner reads slowly, doesn’t enjoy reading, doesn’t read much, doesn’t understand, and continues to read slowly. On the other hand, a ‘virtuous circle’ can be entered by learners: by reading more they understand better, enjoy reading more, read faster, and therefore go on to read more, and so on. All keys are addressed by this element, as well as SC(a).

*Example activity.* An interesting and successful method of planning and running an extensive reading program is called ‘Start with Simple Stories (SSS) Extensive Reading Program’ (Furukawa, 2006). This entails learners aiming for a one million word reading target using graded readers. The all-important, three guiding rules are that they may not use dictionaries, must skip unknown words, and, if the book is difficult or boring, they must stop and get a new book. The focus on ease and fun make it an attractive method for the Arabic L1 context, where reading may not be widely perceived in terms of being easy and enjoyable.

**Element 8: Reading mentoring and guidance**

*Working definition/description.* This element involves showing students how important reading is to you, in other words leading reading by example, and also helping students to make reading choices and providing guidance appropriate to their level of reading experience.

*Justification.* Reading, it is said, is ‘caught not taught.’ In a culture in which reading is perhaps seen as the preserve of the religious leader rather than the parent, reading lacks the critical exposure to allow it to be caught. Students may not have had role models within the family who habitually read or who can give advice on reading.

In this case, the teacher is the ideal person to model good reading behavior, being respected and probably a skilled reader. She is in a good position to suggest reading material, discuss reading choices and show how books should be valued. As Nuttall (1996) says:

> Students follow the example of people they respect, and above all that of their teacher. If the teacher is seen to read with concentration, to enjoy reading and to make use of books, newspapers and so on, the students are more likely to take notice of her when she urges them to do so. (p. 229)
By mentoring reading, K4 is addressed, and SC(a) is compensated for, to some extent.

**Example activities.** There are many possible activities that can be incorporated into the regular class time. For example, a simple mentoring activity is achieved when the teacher reads her own book while students are reading. Source books for ideas can be brought into class to indicate their value, and, if the classroom has a projector, the teacher’s favorite online newspaper can be projected to show articles of potential interest, which can then be discussed.

A particularly useful exercise is an enabling one, making students more independently able to locate texts they would like to read or use. It is easy to forget that students who are in the early stages of developing a reading habit may be unable to locate items of interest, given the overwhelming size of many modern newspapers, which tend to have many sections. The teacher purchases enough copies of one day’s local English language newspaper for each student pair to have their own copy, and then makes a series of activities which require students to find their way around the various sections, including classified advertisements, business and so on. This enables them to access those parts that are of interest to them, with guiding questions such as, 'Which section of the newspaper contains letters to the editor?' The overall aim is to familiarize students with the content and layout of a cheap, readily available source of reading texts. This activity can be followed by more usual intensive reading tasks such as scanning for information (sports results, share prices) and skimming for the gist of specified articles, with students using their own copies of an authentic newspaper rather than photocopied extracts.

**Element 9: World-knowledge development**

**Working definition/description.** World-knowledge development involves widening the students’ knowledge of a range of topics outside the confines of their personal, local and national experiences.

**Justification.** Without world knowledge, many texts are literally incomprehensible. Top-down knowledge (K1) is crucial to understanding; it provides what Nuttall (1996, p. 16) describes as “an eagle-eyed view of the landscape,” without which the ‘terrain’ of a reading text can only be seen as isolated, meaningless parts. Understandably, many learners in the Arabic L1 world lack the world knowledge required for the application of top-down processes to non-Arabic texts, as a result of the immense cultural, social, educational and geographical differences they encounter (an SC(c) and also, perhaps an SC(a) issue). It would be possible to focus reading mainly on texts which are relevant to Arab culture, but this would result in the loss of the vast resource of authentic texts which do not focus on such themes, and would probably only be practicable at lower levels. This approach would also, arguably, disadvantage students, particularly with respect to international exams such as IELTS. The use of carefully-selected texts, starting with more familiar contexts at lower levels and then systematically extending students with texts which facilitate world-knowledge development, is a practical way to address this issue. Much of the development may be expected to arise through the opportunities for discussion and debate that is facilitated by the use of such texts, and it is likely that there is a general educational benefit for learners following this approach.

**Example activities.** Rather than long readings on a few topics, it may be better to provide shorter readings covering more topics. Regular reading of short newspaper articles, up-to-date from around the world and on a range of off-syllabus topics is a long-term strategy, as is regular discussion of issues.

Another option is to provide factual topical information during the pre-reading stages of a reading lesson; the pre-reading stages are a particularly significant teaching opportunity where topical knowledge is lacking.
Element 10: Assessment

Working definition/description. Reading tests can be paper-based or online, of various types and for a range of purposes (Alderson, 2000). If the elements suggested here are followed, testing will need to reflect the previous nine elements, to measure progress in each element and to help decide whether or not an element needs to be continued or given a lower or higher priority (see discussion below). Therefore, tests will need to be devised to measure grammar for reading (Element 2) and so on. These may or may not be ‘traditional’ tests – world-knowledge, for example, may require a more subjective approach than is usual in ELT testing.

Justification. Testing can be used to identify weaknesses (diagnostic tests), and to identify and measure progress (progress tests). It also appears to motivate students (K4), and can be used as extra practice under conditions of high concentration. In addition, testing is often necessary to comply with educational system requirements. K1, K2 and K3 areas may be tested.

Example activity. One of the problems of testing is that it can be very time-consuming in terms of class time and teachers’ marking time. Feedback tends to be delayed as a result of the marking time required with large classes, and students may lose interest in feedback other than their final mark or grade. An approach developed by the author to combat this tendency is the use of tests consisting of short texts of around 400 words, each with exactly ten questions focusing on just one of five question types (True/False/Not Given, short answers, paragraph matching, reference words and vocabulary in context). Marking is simplified by the provision of a quick marking guide, and the use of ten questions facilitates instant calculation of percentage scores. As the students finish, they hand in an answer sheet, while retaining a copy of their answers and the text. The teacher can quickly mark the texts using the marking guide, and within a few minutes of the test ending she has all the scores completed. This system enables immediate in-class marking and feedback. This approach has proved to be motivating, and the frequent use of these short texts provides an opportunity for development of world knowledge (see Element 9 above). Teacher marking time is reduced to minutes. The texts can be further exploited after the feedback is completed. Using an approach of this type, assessment loses some of its negative perceptions in the minds of teachers and learners.

Discussion

Ten elements have been deliberately and, some may argue, artificially separated. In reality, there are many links between and across them; for example, as Grabe and Stoller (2002, pp. 21-22) point out, many hours of exposure to print (perhaps through intensive reading practice) are necessary to develop the fluency that in turn enables the extraction of basic grammatical information, a process they refer to as ‘syntactic parsing.’ It may also be the case that most or all of these elements are already taught, within or outside the reading program. However, some elements may not be specifically addressed, or explicit links with reading may not be made by teachers (or learners).

As suggested in the introduction, at higher levels, and depending on the lower-level syllabi the students have followed, some elements may not be essential – for example, high-frequency vocabulary (Element 1) will at some point be mastered sufficiently to allow the focus of vocabulary teaching and learning to shift towards topic-focused or ESP-focused lexis, such as that found in the Academic Word List. Similarly, spelling and literacy development (Element 5) and awareness of the English and Arabic writing systems (Element 6), as well as the need for reading mentoring and guidance (Element 8) may be determined to be unnecessary at some point, preferably after some form of assessment. However, the remaining elements are open-ended, and higher levels will simply require suitably advanced activities and learning expectations – for example, extensive reading will move towards longer, more authentic texts, and intensive reading activities will focus on the acquisition of higher-level reading skills.
Following the suggested framework may reveal a need for professional development, for example in relation to the teaching of the spelling system. Also, the ten element checklist could be used across programs, to ensure that each element is covered seamlessly. For example, in relation to Element 1, the first thousand words could be dealt with in one program, with responsibility for the next second thousand passed to the following program. It would be good teaching practice to make students aware of these strands and of their progress in relation to each.

It is hoped that addressing all ten elements will lead to an improvement in learners' reading. It is not suggested that this will be a quick or easy process, as reading English, especially in the Arabic L1 context, is an extremely complex, demanding and challenging skill to acquire, requiring patience on the part of learners, teachers and teaching institutions. However, approaching reading in its widest scope will, it is hoped, be exciting and enriching for teachers and learners alike.

References


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