

READING AND ARAB COLLEGE STUDENTS - ISSUES IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES HIGHER COLLEGES OF TECHNOLOGY

Andrew O'Sullivan

ABSTRACT

This article discusses some issues concerning the teaching and learning of reading at the Higher Colleges of Technology in the UAE. The situation of reading within the HCT, concerns relating to the teaching and development of the skill and directions for reading in the future are all discussed.

Introduction

The place of English in the Arab countries is an eminent one. Acquisition of English is viewed as a desirable end since it is seen as the language of wider international communication and of business and technology. However, the need for English varies from one Arab state to another. It sometimes appears that the UAE learners of English enjoy an advantage over many of their fellow Arabs in the Arabic speaking world. One Jordanian writer feels that most Arab learners enjoy few opportunities to encounter or use English outside the classroom. However, "The situation is different in the United Arab Emirates, for example, where people use English in their daily lives because of the multilingual nature of the residents." (Rababah 2003: 15)

The nature of modern UAE society especially in the larger urban areas means there is quite a lot of exposure to the English language in use for real communicative purposes. There is also a substantial English language segment of the local and regional press and electronic media. Thus, a superficial analysis would seem to conclude that the English rich environment of the UAE should provide excellent opportunities for UAE learners of English to develop their competence in the language.

However, the reality of the classroom at HCT and other institutions in UAE does not bear out this conclusion. Despite extensive use of English as a means of communication locally, many UAE students experience difficulties in the learning of English. The reality for many UAE students entering the HCT is that they share the pan-Arab experience pinpointed by Kharma and Hajjaj (1989:2) that English:

"...is a school subject rather than a means of communication. The pass mark is often very low, which means that learners can proceed to further learning of the language without having first mastered fully what they ought to have mastered [my italics] in, say, a given school year"

Reading in the HCT

Concern over poor standards in English is growing. This concern is clearly evident in a report on higher education institutions from the Federal National Council's Committee for Education and Youth and Information and Culture Affairs. The report expresses anxiety over the "general deterioration" in the English standards of UAE students. Tertiary level institutions are having to dedicate considerable resources to equip students with the language skills necessary for coping with academic life. Amongst the specific

problem areas mentioned, study skills are explicitly highlighted (Performance of higher colleges...2004). This is particularly true in the case of reading. English language teachers in the UAE and the HCT share the common world-wide experience of English instructors that most students fail to read adequately.

Various explanations for the situation are proffered. Are current UAE national learners' reading attitudes and performance in English evidence for the postmodernists' view of our contemporary 'post-linguistic' culture, where visual images are ousting language? (Fairclough 1989). More commonly, other variables are pinpointed. The following are some of the main influences cited: 'Reading culture' at home, in school and in the wider community; L1 reading standards; cultural schemata; methods of teaching; backwash from testing; learner motivation, interest and attitude. Very often it is the negative impact of these factors that is stressed. There is a lack of a reading culture or reading habit in society because of the prized oral tradition in Gulf societies (Shannon 2003). Standards of reading in the Arabic language are low too. The phenomena of 'disglossia' may be present to some extent with UAE students just as it is in other Arab countries where standard Arabic is actually students' second language with colloquial Arabic as their 'mother tongue' (Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic 1983). This has several implications. The most significant are that reading skills in Arabic for many students are at second language interlanguage levels; and that English is actually their third language.

Many UAE students appear to lack certain general background knowledge and global awareness that could facilitate their English reading development. Teaching of English in schools is deficient. Mustafa's(2002) research based on interviews with UAE school teachers and school graduates reveals that much of school based language teaching is based on outmoded methodology and that students blame this for their failure to develop positive attitudes towards the language. Mustafa characterizes the situation in UAE schools as teachers using "...the transmission model to deliver information to exam takers". Standardized testing does not encourage the development of reading skills. An interesting theory proposed for some ESL learners' problems with reading in English is reported by Adrian Wurr (2003). Wurr recounts a number of case studies in which learners refer to their perceptions "...that L1 and L2 reading involves separate words and worlds". This 'compartmentalization' is clearly identified by many learners themselves. One specific case is a Korean student who states that he sees "...reading in English as an extension of his school work, an academic task, whereas reading in his native language is more closely associated with personal pursuits and interests". Wurr argues that these beliefs prevent learners transferring strategies for successful reading from L1 to L2. However, this phenomenon could also be viewed as explaining the lack of motivation and interest exhibited by some students in reading in English. Learners viewing English reading as purely for narrow academic and professional purposes may be less inclined to read for anything other than these restricted reasons. We can observe this very 'applied' view of English reading among HCT students. Students are not interested in reading (DWC 2001) and at best are only instrumentally motivated to read for very 'narrow' purposes and do not do a lot of recreational reading (CD 3 AXA Students DWC 1999).

HCT is an English language medium system. This in itself is a challenge for most students coming from an Arabic medium school system. Therefore the question of English language reading competence is of paramount concern to all stakeholders. The

ability to read confidently, efficiently and fluently in English is a key academic and professional enabler for HCT learners and graduates. This reading skill has to encompass a wide range of text types, modes and discourses. Meaningful access to information and resources vital to learning in all subject areas requires HCT students to be proficient and sophisticated English language readers. The HCT recognizes the key role of reading:

“...HCT students learn to access and manage information in English for work and leisure purposes...Reading skills and strategies are taught explicitly and extended from basic level through intensive focus on micro skills using a variety of authentic text types and instructor adapted materials.”

(from the General Education Website at <http://imtcjazz.hct.ac.ae/gened/>)

However, in recognizing the centrality of reading we acknowledge its role(s) across the board implying that the development of this skill in HCT is not just the preserve of the English classroom.

Evidence from HCT's own research however, indicates that students' performance in reading is not satisfactory. HCT students' performance in reading has been shown to be lower than comparable groups of students elsewhere in the world in the Cambridge PET for example (Marsden 2001). Marsden and Wallace (2001) also present evidence which indicates that HCT students are weaker readers in their L1 (Arabic) when compared to the “world mean”.

Many of the reasons discussed above are similarly advanced to explain HCT students' problems with reading and unsatisfactory reading performance. The poor reading performance and negative attitudes of HCT students seem to have been influenced by school experience. Mustafa (2002) in his examination of the teaching of the reading skill in UAE schools concluded from interview data that “Ninety per cent of the teachers perceive reading as a pronunciation exercise...” (77); “...teachers teach only one reading strategy that enables students to obtain explicit information from a graded passage; a kind of literal comprehension.” (78). He goes on to state that : “...almost all correlate ‘reading’ with pronouncing and reading aloud...” (79). Teachers are very heavily focused on helping their students prepare for state examinations in English and as a result the school subject of English is more of a ‘cramming’ and exam preparation exercise than a communicative language learning experience. He also describes how teachers and students in the schools he studied made minimal use of their school libraries.

In this brief overview of the literature I have reviewed, I have tried to identify key areas which go some way to explaining the challenges we face in developing the reading skills of HCT learners.

I summarize the dilemma we face at HCT as the ‘Reading Deficit’. A key cross-discipline and lifelong learning enabling skill is broadly perceived as a weak area for many of our learners. Some of the fundamental elements that make up this dilemma include:

When it comes to HCT students and reading there is evidence of poor attitudes, limited strategies and below average performance in both Arabic and English.

There is a lack of reading 'habit' in both L1 and target language (TL) for a majority of our learners.

Many students appear deficient in terms of their 'Global Awareness'.

There is the negative influence of students' prior learning at school and exam backwash on perceptions of reading & reading strategies.

The perception of English reading's sole purpose for many learners is for use in a purely functional, highly defined academic context.

Poor reading skills have implications for students' other subjects.

I would now like to look at some issues in the teaching and learning of reading which are of importance as we consider how to address the reading problems of HCT students.

Central Issues – Trends in Reading Methodology

READING PROCESSES

The problems of Arabic learners of English with English reading comprehension are well documented. Much of the focus has been on the "higher-level" areas such as syntactic processing and rhetorical structure, conceptual and cultural schemata, and learner attitude and motivation. Paran (1996) says that the "Top down view is intuitively extremely appealing..." and that this view "...has achieved great popularity in ELT" [26].

There is a strand of argument that posits that the top down models of reading comprehension have misled teachers into believing that *the priority strategy* for helping second-language readers develop involves providing these learners with the right background knowledge to enable them decode a text. This is often apparent in the heavy emphasis in reading lessons on 'pre-reading' activities aimed at providing or activating relevant background knowledge and schemata. Paran (ibid) believes this a "dated" representation of the EFL reading process based on an L1 theory that was never widely accepted, popularized by influential methodology texts such as those by Grellet (1981) and Nutall (1982). Stott (2001) claims there is evidence that pre-reading activities, while potentially beneficial, are of limited usefulness. Janzen (2002) is more trenchant. She accuses much of schema theory of being poorly developed, having little solid evidence to support it and of being a "useful simplifying metaphor for the more general notion of

prior knowledge” [282].

Table 1. High- and Low-Level Reading Processes

Lower-Level Processes	Higher-Level Processes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• translation of written code to lexical representation through direct visual-lexical access and phonological recoding• morphological processing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• syntactic and semantic processing• identification of rhetorical structure• activation of schemata• integration of background knowledge• influence of attitude, motivation and reader interest

Hayes and Schmauder (1999)

A key strand in this research has been on the influence of the first language Arabic (L1) processes on the learners’ reading in the target language (TL) English and again this has been particularly concerned with such transfer at the higher level.

While acknowledging the importance of considering higher-order processes in Arabic learners’ ESL learning, we should not ignore the impact of lower-level processes. Bottom up processes have received a lot of bad press in the literature. Mc Donough (1981) characterizes such processing in pejorative terms. It is “characteristic of the beginner and unsuccessful reader” [51] ignoring the need to identify good and poor behaviours rather than good or bad readers. Such behaviours can characterize “...all readers at different times, different circumstances...” (Clarke 1981: 78). Just as errors were once the mark of ‘poor writing’ and are now understood as an indication of learning and development; so reading ‘miscues’ and difficulties can also indicate developmental changes (Devine 1981).

Hayes and Schmauder (ibid) argue that “the ESL reading comprehension difficulties exhibited by native speakers of Arabic may instead result from deficient letter and word identification” aka as lower level processes. Abu-Rabia (2002) echoes this concern pointing out the roles of phonology, morphology and sentence structure in Arabic reading emphasizing the key role of trilateral-quadrilateral roots in Arabic visual-orthographic processing. This lack of proficiency in basic decoding skills is compounded by a lack of linguistic skills.

Stott (2001) cites Eskey’s conclusion that "language is a major problem in second language reading" as well as highlighting the critical role of vocabulary. Without ‘automaticity’ in the lower-level processes learners will not be able to achieve fluency in their reading. Stott concludes that

“...basic bottom-up processing must not be ignored and the importance of a lexico-grammatical focus, particularly in the early stages of learning, needs to be recognized.” (ibid: 6)

Paran (1996) emphasizes the often overlooked importance of visual input, bottom up processing, and automatic word processing in ESL reading.

Some literature points to the need for learners to develop ‘automaticity’ in various linguistic operations in order to free up memory resources and allow more focus on actual communication. Achieving this entails a lot of practice on specific elements and sub-skills to build up automaticity. The more automaticity achieved with certain elements of processing, the more fluent and proficient a language user becomes. Failure to achieve automaticity means “...learners typically stay at the faltering, controlled processing stage”. Ensuring automaticity in reading tasks such as “...word recognition, phonemic/graphemic decoding, and syntactic feature recognition...” can help”... free up memory and cognition for the type of fluent reading that requires constant attention and effort” (Yoshimura 2000).

Slow reading is often associated with poor reading “...involving the processing of information at such a slow rate that the reader is unable to hold enough detail in short-term memory to permit decoding of the overall message of the text” (Bell 2001).

Improving students’ reading speeds to adequate levels in tandem with their comprehension helps them be better readers.

There seems now to be a wider recognition of the need for a broader approach to reading skills for Arab students. This entails recognition of the unique problems these learners face in their English reading and the use of a combination of bottom-up and top-down strategies to help them develop reading proficiency (Marsden 2002) .

LEXIS AND READING

The top-down focus that I referred to earlier has implications for the area of lexis in reading by the belief (imported from L1 reading) that learners could draw on their world knowledge to predict, infer and guess text content and word meanings. This view relegated linguistic and lexical knowledge to a minor role in the reading process. Paran (1996) remarks on how Grellet’s influential 1981 methodology book *Developing Reading Skills* characterized reading as a constant guessing game. Again, this view has been revisited.

Cobb (1999) reports that word knowledge is the key ingredient in successful reading in both L1 and L2. Word knowledge is the major contributor to L2 academic reading success and is more important than other kinds of linguistic knowledge including syntax. Cobb bases his assertion on the work of other authorities, but also points to experience in Oman where the major weakness secondary school graduates entering college was in reading English texts. The root of this problem appeared to be the students’ lack of vocabulary. The vocabulary deficit is of fundamental importance given the findings of research on reading effectiveness and the critical mass of lexical knowledge needed to achieve reading competence. Hirsh and Nation (1992) showed that to understand an unsimplified text, a reader needs to know 95% of the tokens. This implied that a text is comprehensible when there is no more than one unknown token every two lines! The threshold level for vocabulary knowledge has been posited strongly by the work of Nation and others. This work shows that the correctly constituted list of around 3000

words can cover 95% of items needed as a base for reading in the academic domain. The main issue here is the learning and expansion of students' vocabularies. This is an intricate and involved area where the matter is not just about exposure to the vocabulary, but about active knowledge of its form, meaning and use; repeated contact with it in rich natural environments; and the temporal constraints within which this complex learning has to occur. Possessing a rich L2 reading vocabulary makes it easier and faster for an L2 learner to acquire more – a phenomenon Horst et al (1998) memorably characterize as the 'rich get richer'. Vocabulary then is a key enabler of reading fluency and a key component of continuing language acquisition.

QUANTITY IMPROVING QUALITY?

In the literature there is a strong trend discernible which advocates the positive impact of extensive reading on learners' reading skills, speed, comprehension, motivation and acquisition of lexis. Extensive reading is often contrasted to intensive reading and suggests two ends of a reading continuum. Davidson offers an excellent summary of the features of each:

Intensive Reading	Extensive Reading
Emphasis on the quality of reading	Emphasis on the quantity of reading
Short texts	Long texts
Difficult texts	Easy texts (i + 1)
Usually authentic texts	Usually simplified / graded texts
Many tasks	Few tasks
Reading is slow and careful	Reading is fast and fluent
Need to understand the text in detail	An overall understanding is sufficient
Primarily for language study and reading skills development	Primarily for pleasure, information, and language acquisition.
Teacher-driven	Learner-driven
Teacher selects the text	Learner selects the text
Teacher often intervenes in the reading process	Teacher rarely intervenes, if at all, in the reading process
Teacher determines where and when to read and for how long	Learner determines where and when to read and for how long
Reading is usually done in the classroom	Reading is usually done at home or in the library

Davidson concludes that :

...empirical evidence indicates that extensive reading does have a positive impact on learners' vocabulary development, general language proficiency, and helps to improve students' writing skills. In addition, extensive reading programs have contributed to increasing readers' sight vocabulary and developing reading fluency, and to promoting positive attitudes towards reading.

However, he does emphasize that extensive reading programmes must be well managed and should complement, not replace, reading programmes. Smith (1997) outlines some useful strategies utilized during a successful extensive reading programme in Brunei secondary schools – “These strategies included reading aloud, setting up a self-access room, obtaining appropriate materials, and communicating with fellow teachers, parents, and with educators at the primary schools from which the students came”. Smith argues that a well organized extensive reading programme can actually help effect a transformation in a “non-reading culture”

Timothy Bell (2001) reports on his research with Yemeni students who were of elementary level in terms of their English proficiency. This research demonstrated gains in reading speed combined with similar large and significant gains in reading comprehension test performance among a group of learners which had undergone an extensive reading programme using graded readers compared with another group which had focused on intensive reading. Bell concludes that these results posit a powerful role for extensive reading in “in stimulating reading improvement” . He also stresses how learners need freedom to select their own material in line with their own interests.

Research also indicates that while extensive reading can help increase readers' vocabulary, this increase is often quite small. This can be improved if there is ‘direct intervention’ vocabulary teaching along with the extensive reading.

Directions

READING IN THE COMMUNITY

It is important to develop community links and broad based action in collaboration with other interested parties to try and help foster more reading culture – community outreach programs in reading, reading programs in schools, reading promotion in public libraries, working with bookshops and book distributors, with newspapers and media organizations etc.

Look at ways of implementing HCT wide links and action with regards to promoting reading through college libraries and resource centres, college retail outlets, and on-line resources.

EXTENSIVE READING

Development of strategies and materials to help with extensive reading initiatives through Portfolios, SSR , ‘Speed Reading’ etc.

T & L & RESEARCH

Research on the reading problems of our HCT learners – e.g. using Meara & Ryan’s vowel blindness test to ascertain the extent of problems with word recognition.

Research to ascertain a clear picture of the methods and strategies employed to teach reading across the HCT.

Identifying and reviewing useful materials for developing students’ reading skills.
Work on promoting reading across the disciplines with reading strategy awareness and training for non-English faculty.

Organizing PD fora for English faculty to share and discuss best practice, initiatives and ‘strategies that work’ relating to reading and vocabulary teaching and learning.

Produce a booklet on “Reading and the HCT student” to advise faculty of the issues and strategies.

Implementing improved strategies for intensive reading skills with focus on both bottom-up & top-down processes.

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