Arab Learners of English and Reverse Visualization as a Reading Problem

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Abstract

Reading is a gateway to language learning as it is the only/major source of input in a foreign/second language situation. Several factors influence reading speed and comprehension, for example, learner's language aptitude, attitude to the target language, and motivation. Much research has already been done in these areas.

The areas that have remained the Cinderella of research into reading skills are the impacts of (1) the phonological differences between English and Arabic, (2) the letter-sound disparity of the English language, (3) the phonological similarities between some English words and Arabic obscene and vulgar words and (4) the reverse directionality of the English writing system, as compared to right-to-left writing system of the Arabic language on reading pace and message reception. The present paper attempts to illustrate how speed and comprehension are adversely affected by reverse visualization, and offers suggestions to overcome the hurdles.

The Place of English in Arab Countries

Three types of people use English: those for whom it is a first language, those for whom it is a second or additional language, and those who learn it as a foreign language. Where do Arab speakers of English belong? Certainly, they do not belong to the inner circle; they belong to the outer circle and the expanding circle respectively (Kachru 1992) though slowly they may move to the outer circle because more and more people are learning English. The circles are not static; they are dynamic. So how do we describe the place of English in Oman in terms of its status and role as a first, second and third language? We can say that English is a foreign language in Oman and in other Arab countries. Now, you will ask me why I describe English as nearly a foreign language in Arab countries. The reason is quite clear. English is spoken and written by a small minority in a few situations.

The Importance of Reading Skills in ESL/EFL Situations

All of us learnt our first language by listening and imitating. That is how children in Britain, America and Australia learn English. However, people in most Asian countries do not have opportunities to learn English the natural way. Then, how do most of us in non-English speaking countries learn English? Well, we listen to our teachers and pick up some English. But teacher talk alone, though very significant in our contexts, cannot give us enough English. That is why teachers give their students reading tasks nearly every day. Obviously,

reading material is language input. Teachers give students a variety of reading materials to read and provide multiple opportunities to learn vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structures as they occur in authentic texts. Students thus get a complete picture of the ways in which the elements of the language work together to convey meaning.

Recently, there has been a lot of talk about communicative method of teaching English. We occasionally see some teachers trying to use it in their classrooms. This communicative approach has resulted in an emphasis on learning English through spoken interaction in the classroom. However, reading remains the main source of language input in ESL and EFL situations. That is why reading dominates English language teaching materials. Teachers spend periods after periods reading aloud and explaining paragraphs after paragraphs in their school and college classrooms, and students have to do loads of homework based on reading. In other words, English functions as a library language in countries like most Asian countries. Students spend hours reading and understanding texts. They grapple with grammar and struggle with vocabulary. They spend a very large chunk of their time reading English textbooks.

However, students face several reading problems and do not know how to overcome them and improve their reading skills. Universities, institutes and language centres organize seminars, conferences, symposia, and workshops on reading skills. Native and non-native speakers of English write hundreds of books on how to develop reading skills in ESL and EFL learners. Books sell like fire. Academic events are described as grand successes. Scholarly gatherings come to a close, but reading problems do not. They continue to haunt curriculum designers, syllabus framers, course-book writers, teachers, source-book experts, and teacher

trainers. There are too many theories and too many methods. There are so many of them that teachers feel confused. Teacher training colleges and universities suggest different theories and classroom approaches. Based on the premise that little knowledge is a dangerous thing, there is a constant effort to update teacher attitudes, skills and knowledge. But is too much knowledge always a safe thing? I think what we need is a common sense approach. Such an approach involves several factors—a parent-like understanding of how second language is acquired, practical hands-on experience in teaching a second language, and knowledge and understanding of student backgrounds and prevailing conditions.

Unfortunately, poor reading skills, and therefore poor learning skills, have become a reality for an alarming number of children. As we know, reading and learning are the two things that determine the success of children during school career. Reading mastery is a basic building block of school success. First children learn to read; then they read to learn. Because children with reading problems and reading difficulties battle to read, they are therefore also hampered in the learning situation. When children are poor at reading, they fall behind in all of their schoolwork almost immediately. Furthermore, this reading failure can last an entire lifetime and make higher education and higher earnings out of reach. That is why we need to attack reading problems at an early stage with some knowledge of theory and lots of practical wisdom. No doubt, we need to know the basics of the different approaches, methods and techniques of teaching in general and language teaching in particular. However, that is not enough. The teacher has to take practical measures to help the learner. For example, a teacher of reading skills, like the teacher of any other subject or skills needs to maintain a diary to keep track of the learners' problems, understand why those problems occur, think about

remedial steps and then implement them. In particular, the teacher has to keep in mind the fact that reading in a second language is different from reading in a first language.

How does Reading in a Second Language Differ from Reading in a First Language?

Second/foreign language teachers have to make special efforts to understand the reading behaviours and reading problems of their students, because reading process is a highly personal activity and hence difficult to observe and monitor. Spoken and written performance is easy to scrutinize; reading performance is not. The reader himself may have an idea of what is happening when he is reading a text. However, quite often he may not be in a position to explain the process. The position of an observer is more difficult as he has no clue to help him access the complex psycholinguistic game that is being played inside the mind of the reader. As Rumelhart (1977) points out, reading involves the reader, the text and the interaction between the reader and the text. When we read a text, we try to process new information with reference to old information. Our mind tries to discover connections between the old and the new. As Cook (1992) argues, " the L2 user does not switch off the L1 while processing the L2, but has it constantly available" (p. 571). Cook further adds that teachers of a second language must not and cannot treat it in isolation from the learners' first language, because the first language is present in the learners' minds, whether the teacher wants it to be there or not (p. 584). The two languages interact with each other in all sorts of ways. All second language learners fall back on their first language while processing second language input. The incoming fresh data include our experience of the world and knowledge of the language (Widdowson 1983, Cook 1989).

Any reading, be it reading in the first language or second/foreign language, is an attempt at negotiation of meanings, an interaction between the reader and the text. However, reading by a monolingual reader is different from reading by a "bi-literate reader" (Singhal 1998). Reading in a second language is a bilingual process, not a monolingual event (Upton 1997). Bilingual readers have two languages available simultaneously. They consciously or subconsciously process the second language with reference to their first language.

Some research has been done in

(i)　　　second language acquisition (Ellis 1985, 1997),

(ii)　　reading comprehension (Haenggi and Perfetti 1992, 1994),

(iii)　　the factors that influence second language reading comprehension (Afflerbach 1990, Barnett 1988, Block 1986, Carrell 1983, Levine and Haus 1985),

(iv)　　bilingual proficiency (Bialystok 2000),

(v)　　language transfer (Gass and Selinker 1983, Odlin, et al. 1989), and

(vi)　　inter-lingual errors (Mahmoud 2000, 2002).

Sarig (1987) and Anderson (1991) rightly point out that reading is a highly individual activity. Nevertheless, there are general factors that influence reading speed and comprehension. One such factor is the reader's mother tongue. However, we do not know for sure how people use their mother tongue when they read something written in another language. But, one thing is indisputably clear. As Cook (1992, p.571) points out, we cannot switch off our native language resources when we read in a second language. It is unrealistic

to treat a second language in isolation from the first language. Our native language is all the time in our minds. It is readily and constantly available to us. Its knowledge is connected in all sorts of ways with the second language. As Selinker (1992, p. 171) remarks, native language has "a principled role" in second language acquisition. This role of the first language has become a central issue in second language acquisition thinking.

Some Common Reading Problems

Sub-vocalization occurs when we pronounce internally what we are reading in order to grasp the meaning. For example, as I read this sentence I hear words in my head and from there I am able to understand. My vocal cords don't move, as I can talk and read at the same time, and still hear the words internally. However, some readers may even move their lips. If they do that, they are auditory readers. This is the bad habit that is the hardest to drop. Auditory reading is difficult to beat because we are used to reading and hearing the words in our minds. Some people even go so far as to mumble the words. The problem with sub-vocalization is that it greatly slows down the reading process. A sub-vocalizer has to wait to hear the words for comprehension to kick in, and this unnecessarily delays reading speed. Eliminating sub-vocalization is a key to faster reading.

Fixation is that split second when our eyes focus on a letter or a word. Fixations are the actual stops or pauses between eye-spans when the eye is moving to its next fixation point. We cannot see while the eye moves so we do need the fixation points to see. The problem is most beginners fixate word by word by word.

The fixations slow them down because they are stopping on each and every word. The problem that comes up here is that, like the other obstacles, it impedes concentration and comprehension as well. The paradox with reading slowly is that it really hurts comprehension.

Regression is when the reader jumps back to earlier segment on the page due to some reason. We back skip go back over what we have previously read. Regressions are the most wasteful. They can really slow down the reader. People regress for many reasons.

- Sometimes a word is deleted to avoid repetition, but the reader thinks it is a mistake (My ideas are down-to-earth and my examples simple.).

- The word is difficult to spell (lieutenant).

- The word is difficult to pronounce (rendezvous).

- The word has silent letters in it (psychology).

- The word echoes some sound (abracadabra).

- The meaning of the word is not clear ("bovine spongiform   encephalopathy" for "mad cow disease").

- The word is similar to another word in its sound ("T. S. Eliot's Prufrock is an impotent person." The word "impotent" sounds like "important".).

- The expression is ambiguous ("Visiting guests can be a nuisance".).

- The expression shocks the reader in some way ("I spent the best part of my life sleeping in the arms of another man's wife! I mean I spent my babyhood and childhood sleeping in the arms of my mother.").

Some Reading Problems of Arab Learners of English

Anyone who has taught English as a foreign language in the Arab world is familiar with the problems these learners face in learning English. As we know, Arabic is a non-Romanized language and so its native speakers face special challenges in learning to read. These problems result from:

the English alphabet,

the left-to-right direction of English texts, and

the complex letter-sound correspondences of English.

These factors result in the following common problems:

reverse visualization

fixation,

subvocalization and

regression.

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We will restrict the scope of the present paper to the problem of reverse visualization and resulting regressions caused by the right-to-left writing system of the Arabic language. However, before we discuss this specific difficulty, we will briefly mention some common problems of Arab readers of English.

Some work has already been done on some problems of Arabic speaking learners of English. Let me briefly mention two such attempts. One is a study by Ryan and Meara (1996), who claim that Arabic speaking learners are "vowel blind". They think that this blindness is a result of the tri-consonantal vocabulary patterns in Arabic. They illustrate their intuitive claim with a set of examples. They offer *katab* (he wrote), *yiktib* (he writes), *kaatib* (clerk), *kitaab* (book), *maktab* (office), and *maktaba* (library) as examples of the K-T-B tri-consonantal root. As we can see, all these words are related formally as well as semantically. They all contain the three consonants (K-T-B) and they are related in their meaning (writing, book, library, office, clerk). In their opinion, Arabic speakers make meanings mainly on the basis of the three consonants, not so much on the basis of the vowels between the consonants. In other words, the three consonants are enough to assume that the word that contains them is related to other words in the same domain. Thus in Arabic, vowels

are secondary to consonants. But, the case of English is different. Ryan and Meara(1996) give a set of examples form English to show that consonants are not the only clue to the semantics of words. To cite one case, the R-D-R tri-consonantal root is not enough for us to relate different words to the same domain. For example, *reader*, *radar*, *rider* and *raider* have the three consonants (R-D-R) in them, but they do not belong to the same domain. The R-D-R tri-consonantal root is shared by words that are not semantically related. Do consonantal clues help us relate words semantically in English? Well, it is not impossible to find examples of certain combinations of sounds that tend to go together with certain meanings in English too. For example, the "sn" combination in English often suggests something to do with breathing noises and nose*: sniff, sneeze, snout, snot, sneer, snuff, snorkel*, *snooze, snore, snicker, snivel, snort* and *snuffle*. A person who goes round with their nose in the air might be *snooty*, might *snub* people, and a bit of a *snob*. Another case is that of the form *sm(o),* which can be said to carry similar meanings: *smoke, smother and smoulder*. The following is yet another set of words that have some semantic similarity: *jingle, juggle, jet, jiggle, jitney, jitterbug, jitters, jive, jog, joggle, jolt, jostle, journey* and *jump.* However, such combinations are exceptions and are often misleading. That is to say, we cannot guess the semantic field by just looking at the consonants; we need to look at the vowels too in order to get to the meaning. Having compared the importance of consonants in Arabic and English for word recognition, Ryan and Meara argue that this dominance of consonants in Arabic is a cause of the vowel blindness among Arabic speaking learners of English.

The other study is by Mahmoud (2002), who examines how Arab learners of English interpret English idioms. For example, *day after day*, *red-faced*, *head over heels* and *stretch one's legs* mean *every day*,

embarrassed, *completely,* and *take a walk* respectively in British English; but Arab learners of English interpret them as *every other day*, *furious*, *upside down* and *lie down* respectively.

Directionality and Reverse Visualization Problem

Directionality is another visual skill important for academic success. One test for this skill is illustrated by a figure that represents a duck and a rabbit at the same time. If the visual reflex is from left-to-right, a duck will be seen. On the contrary, if the visual reflex is from right-to-left, a rabbit will be seen. There is a popular psychological test that requires a spectator to answer if s/he visualizes an old woman or a young woman in the picture. The perception depends on how one approaches the picture, on whether one starts the visual reflex from left or from right. This is just one test out of a series to determine the directionality of the visual reflex.

As far as languages are concerned, some have vertical orientation and some have horizontal orientation. Vertical orientation languages are usually written from top to bottom, and horizontal orientation languages are usually written from left to right. Most languages are written from left to right: English, German, French, all seventeen Indian languages, and Vietnamese are some examples. A few languages are written from right to left: Arabic and Hebrew are two examples. It is just a convention of our cultures that the English language is written from left to right and the Arabic language is written from right to left.

Because of the right to left orientation of Arabic, directionality is a serious problem for Arab learners of English. One of the common problems with them is optical reversal. Children with this kind of problem often confuse letters like "b" and "d", "q" and "p". This tendency toward mono-phonemic reversal is extended to bi-phonemic reversals. As a result, they sometimes read *rat* as *tar,* and *won* as *now*. Such reversals may or may not produce semantically meaningful units. For example, when the student reads *boor* as *door*, *bitch* as *ditch*, *big* as *dig*, and *bark* as *dark*, the reversal is lexically productive and might lead to misinterpretation; but when the student reads *quick* as *puick*, the reversal does not yield an English word. Fortunately, this tendency toward reverse visualization is not an incurable problem. I have tried the following exercises with some Arab learners.

Remedial Activities for Reverse Visualization

Reverse visualization is a common phenomenon among the people whose native language follows the right-to-left writing system such as Arabic and Hebrew. Fortunately, with a little effort reverse visualization can be corrected. The teacher needs to select his/her activities carefully to help the learners overcome the problem. Here are a few remedial exercises:

 i) Give them practice in words they usually misread**:**

Many Arab learners of English visualize words and their spellings in a wrong way. Visualization is the ultimate visual skill. This is similar to being able to see things in the mind's eye. The ability to visualize is closely related to the ability to abstract from specifics and the ability to visualize is deeply involved in this

process. One way is to make the learners see the difference between *from* and *form*, *blow* and *bowl*, *broad* and *board*, *flow* and *fowl*, *lion* and *loin*, *split* and *spilt*, etc.

ii) Give them unidirectional spelling words that they cannot read from right-to-left:

Look at the following words carefully: *read, eat, drink, get, need,* and *back*. Can you read them from right-to-left? Do you get new words from the ones you can?

iii) Give them retronyms (bidirectional spelling words) that they can read from right-to -left:

Look at the following words carefully: *bud, but*, *dam*, *deer, gel, god, gum, lived, loop, loot, mood, nap, not, pat, tap, tip, top, war,* and *was*. Can you read them from right-to-left? Do you get new words when you read them like that? Write down the new words and check their meanings with the help of a dictionary.

iv) Give them tautonyms (bidirectional homophonic spelling words) that they can read from left-to-right and right-to-left:

Look at the following words and their spellings carefully. First read them from left to right. Then read them from right to left: *dad, deed, dud, eye, mum/mom, noon, nun, peep*, and *pop*.

Do you get new words when you read them from right-to-left?

Reverse visualization causes multiple regressions during second/foreign language reading process. As we have noted earlier, regressions are the most wasteful as they considerably slow down reading speed and comprehension. I have tried some strategies to help students with regression problem.

Regression Problem

As we have recorded earlier, second/foreign language readers at the elementary and intermediate stages regress for various reasons, for example,

* They encounter words that have silent letters: "k" and "p" as in *knife*, *receipt*.

* They come across words that contain letters that represent different sounds: "a" in *fat, father, fall*, *woman* and *fate.*

Arab readers of English regress particularly due to the following reason:

* They come across words that use the same letters in different sequences, for example*, board* and *broad*, *diary* and *dairy.*

Remedial Activities for Regression Problem

v) Tell them to read the text until the end:

Perhaps the best way to overcome regression is to help the learners to read the text until the end of the section before jumping back. This alone will massively reduce the need to re-read what they have already covered. The teacher can ask students to read several short passages without stopping. Later, he can give them longer texts.

vi) Give them brief passages containing wrongly spelt words and ask them to read them fast:

Read aloud the following passages as fast as you can without going back to what you have already read:

i) I cdnuolt blveiee taht I cluod aulaclty uesdnatnrd waht I was rdanieg The phaonmneal pweor of the hmuan mnid Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be in the rghit pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. Amzanig huh? yaeh and I awlyas thought slpeling was ipmorantt

ii) "If you wnat to raed fatser, you suhold raed sipmle sorteis ervey day. Moroveer, you should not wrroy abuot the slieplng of inviduisal wrods. Tehn olny can you icnaerse yuor raednig seped. Wehn you are raeding you shluod not re-raed wrods and snetneces taht you have arlaedy raed."

iii) Well, here's the answer to why you forgot to carry your umbrella even as dark coulds thundered outside.
(Times of India, Oct. 25, 2005)

The teacher listens to the student and notes how many times s/he regresses. The teacher gives away prizes to the students who read the passage without regressions.

Conclusion

The paper discusses and illustrates the reading difficulties of Arab learners of English. These problems stem from several reasons such as the nature of the English alphabet, the letter-sound disparity of the English language, and the reverse directionality of the English writing system, as compared to Arabic writing system. These factors lead to bad reading habits like fixation, regression, sub-vocalization, and reverse visualization. One cause is the phonological differences between Arabic and English. For example, Arabic does not have /p/ sound. Consequently, learners find it quite difficult to articulate words that contain /p/ sound. Most Arab speakers of English replace /p/ with /b/. So when they want to say *pear* and *pad*, they end up saying *bear* and *bad* respectively. The listener has to get used to this kind of accent in order to understand what the speaker is saying. Moreover, /f/ and /v/ are allophonic variants in Arabic; as a result it is rather difficult for the listener to distinguish between words such as *very* and *ferry, van* and *fan.* The awareness of the difference between /p/ and /b/, and /f/ and /v/ created by their English teacher helps the students in the long run. However, at the initial stage, this awareness seems to have an adverse effect on reading speed and comprehension, because the Arab reader vocalizes/sub-vocalizes fixates and regresses over words that have /p/, /f/ and /v/ sounds in them. A second factor is the phonological similarities between some English words and Arabic taboo words. They consciously or subconsciously associate these words with similar sounding Arabic words, especially taboo words. A third factor is the reverse direction of the English language writing system, as compared to

the Arabic right-to-left writing system. The present paper limits its scope to the discussion of reading problems stemming from this oppositeness. The resulting reverse visualization causes multiple regressions, fixations, and sub-vocalizations. Consequently, reading speed and comprehension are adversely affected. Having discussed these problems, the paper offers a few exercises that can help overcome or at least minimize these problems.

Profile

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