

Redefining the Reading Culture: Overcoming EFL Teachers' Prejudices against Students' Reading Habits

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Abstract

The rationale of this study is to examine the negative perceptions common among some societies regarding the print-based reading cultures of other societies. The sample whose perceptions are under investigation are English teachers working in higher education in the Sultanate of Oman, while the specific society or group of people whom are believed to have a lacking reading culture are Omani university students. Teachers' perceptions of the reading culture of Omani youths are studied and compared with students' reports on their actual reading habits. The paper calls for an understanding of the true meaning of having a reading culture and presents a more realistic and equitable picture of the existing reading habits among Omani university students.

Keywords: Reading, Reading Culture, Arab Students' Reading Habits, , Omani Students' Views on Reading

Introduction

Despite the different backgrounds teachers in Oman have, they all seem to be quite frustrated about basically the same aspects of the students' linguistic and study skills abilities. Some of the judgments they make about students are similar to the extent that there seems to be a list of quote-like statements that teachers quite frequently pass on without much reflection. Personally, I have heard some of my fellow expatriate university teachers, some of whom have taught in the Sultanate for over 20 years, make statements like: "Omani students don't have a reading culture", "Omani students have no motivation to read", "Omani students' parents don't encourage them to read", and as an explanation for this widespread misfortune, some say "Most of the students' parents are illiterate". The latter shocking standpoint made the former uneducated arguments sound louder and more disturbing than before especially that I have not had any similar impressions about Omani students or their parents while working in the same context for over seven years.

Can these arguments be true just because they are common? Can any given society not have a reading culture? To see whether these negative perceptions against Omani youths are justifiable, viewpoints of a sample of English university teachers regarding Omani students' reading culture are compared with reports that a sample of Omani university students gave regarding their actual reading habits and backgrounds.

Background

Reading, both as a skill and habit, has been a subject debated in many contexts in the Arab world. Teachers and researchers preach about the significance of this skill in classes, conferences or even on TV; this has encouraged the public to talk about reading in many arenas outside the academic world.

In newspapers, for example, reading and the spread of a culture for reading has been the center of debate by people from different backgrounds and walks of life. A series of interviews with the public in *Muscat Daily* (2011) on the reading habits of young people give many interesting viewpoints about the situation of the reading culture among Omanis. An Omani science lab supervisor states that students feel that they are burdened by homework, so they have no time to spare to read for pleasure. Another Omani national agrees adding the bad influence of school peers and friends who do not promote reading as another reason for the lack of reading. He contends that the habit of readings is missing among Omani youths because of the low rate of education in the past, which affects the importance parents give to reading; this reiterates what some teachers, mentioned in *Introduction* above, stated about the connection between illiteracy in Oman and lack of reading. This means that even among Omanis, parents' illiteracy is perceived as one of the roots of the lack of a reading culture among Omani youths. It is clear that even Omani nationals are over-generalizing the problem of lack of reading to cover the entire Omani population.

Expatriates in Oman also hold negative views about the situation of reading in Oman; a publisher living in Oman states that the reading habit is disappearing because of the shortage in public libraries in Oman (*Muscat Daily*, 2011). This argument, coming from a publisher in Oman, is clearly restricting the habit of reading for pleasure to reading paper books, magazines and so on.

Similar negative pictures come from reports and surveys. A DW-world report cites a Lebanese survey which found that Arabs read only about seven minutes per year. In December 2010, an article in *Gulf News*, a Dubai-based newspaper, gives a similar portrayal of the reading

culture in Arab societies. Absal (2010) reports Dr. Mustafa, a college teacher in Dubai, quoting a UN survey in 2008 that found that:

the average Arab citizen in the Middle East reads approximately four pages of literature a year- which corresponds to learning five words a day.

The average American, he continues, reads 11 books per year, while the average British reads eight books per year. According to Dr. Mustafa, the reason why Arabs are so far back compared to the American and British is that Arab parents and teachers in the Arab world do not encourage reading at a young age. Many children in the Arab world see reading “merely as a school task and thus a necessary evil”; this means that it is by no means a source of pleasure for them. Also, there are aspects that hinder Arabs from reading in Arabic, for example, the limited vocabulary learned through reading, the nature of Arab culture being generally oral which makes speech a vital source of information, and the different Arabic dialects existing in many cultures compared with what they read in standard Arabic.

However, an important question about this negative depiction of Arabs’ reading habits is: are all these aspects completely negative ones? For example, instead of categorizing a unique skill of a given culture, such as the oral nature of the Arab culture, as a disadvantage causing a lack of improvement in other skills, we must see this as a separate positive feature of that culture and a possible reason why Arabs depend on different sources of information compared with other societies. Boullata (1989) describes the oral nature of the Arab culture as a reliable method to preserve the Arab culture and pass on knowledge from one generation to another. At one level, orality has led Arabs to depend on memory which has helped them in reciting poetry, telling epic narratives and romances, and passing on proverbs and genealogical data. At another level, orality has helped develop skills such as improvising which Arabs used in poetic duels. Clearly, the oral tradition of Arabs has given the Arab culture depth and sophistication; therefore, rather than categorizing it as a disadvantage that has affected the Arab reading culture, it should be seen as a source of wealth for cultural transmission passed on from previous generations. The fact that Arabs today still depend on orality is by no means a drawback; similar to reading, orality is a skill in itself. Therefore, Arabs are not lacking information; they simply derive it from other sources besides reading.

Another question to ask is: whether the lack of an interest in reading is typical of and specific to the Arab culture? American schools adequately provide children with the skill to read but not the will to read. Bayless states that in America “While virtually everyone is capable of reading, half are alliterate; they have chosen not to read for pleasure”. The term “alliteracy” is best defined as “the capacity to read but not the desire” (2010, p.10). This means that people are only reading for work purposes and to manage daily life routines. Findings of the Research Division Report of 2004 and the Renaissance Learning of 2008 show that:

10% of the population reads approximately 80% of the books purchased or circulated. 40% of the population is responsible for only 20% of books purchased or circulated (Bayless, 2010, p. 5).

In Africa, there are many similar reports about the lack of an interest in reading. Nigerian children, for instance, Onwubiko (2010) states, are no longer interested in reading outside homework despite the fact that the past generations had a thirst for education and knowledge. Reasons for the ‘lack of interest in knowledge’ in Nigeria are: (1) lack of motivation among children, which creates a general apathy for reading, (2) lack of parental guidance, monitoring and encouragement, so children are not managing their time properly, (3) inadequate funding of

educational institutions to build libraries or buy books, (4) poor economy and low standard of living, which forces parents to worry more about food than knowledge, (5) quest for money among children to support their families, (6) the examination code, which makes children care more about passing exams than acquiring knowledge, (7) absence of school and public/community libraries, (8) increasing cost of publishing and lack of support for publishers, and (9) advent of the Internet, which children are abusing and copying from without much reading.

Obviously, some of the above reasons apply to countries other than Nigeria. They could well be factors working in many advanced societies at different degrees or levels. Thus, the problem of a lack of an interest in reading is by no means restricted to one given society. The dangerous views against the reading culture of Arabs, arguments such as those presented by my colleagues, seem to be prevailing despite the fact that they come from professionals in the field of education. However, one of the most important weaknesses in these views is that although they agree on the idea that there is a lack of a reading culture, they do not agree on the definition of the problem; i.e. 'What is meant by a reading culture?'

My colleagues' definition of lack of a reading culture stems from their frustration that identifies the problem as being a lack of an interest in reading in the English language, which is why students are not learning and developing as quickly as they hope. As for Dr. Mustafa's argument, he restricts the lack of a reading culture as a lack of interest in literature. But is literature the only source for pleasure or knowledge? Such dramatic discrepancies in the definitions of what constitutes a reading culture are therefore the core source of the problem.

As for the public, they too have contradictory ideas of what constitutes a reading culture in terms of identifying the sources for pleasure reading. To some, paper books are the only means of pleasure reading, while others depend on many other tools. The differences in people's preferences, whether of paper copies or e-copies, seem to be the prime source of the misunderstanding. It goes without saying, the public as well as professionals are in a dire need for a clear definition of 'The Reading Culture' for them to pass judgment on whether or not there is any lack of it.

Contrary to the different ideas both the public and educators have about what constitutes pleasure reading, there is an agreement in the literature that the definition of reading culture is not restricted to the reading of books; rather, the definition is broad and incorporates all types of reading sources. Bayless defines reading as a cultural trait:

the result of specific actions and behaviors inculcated in the family environment which produce the will to read (manifested in habitual and enthusiastic reading) married with the skill to read (usually imparted by schools)(2010, p. 12).

Enthusiastic reading is not defined by race, IQ level, gender, or income, and it helps achieve desirable outcomes in life. Onwubiko defines reading culture as:

a learned practice of seeking knowledge, information and entertainment through the written words. Such practice can be acquired by reading books, journals, magazines, and newspapers, etc (2010).

Therefore, a simple definition of the reading culture can be: reading about what interests you from any given source, be that a magazine, newspaper, webpage, or even comic book. Different cultures and generations within each culture depend on various sources for pleasure reading, and the current advancement in media have changed many cultural habits. The same DW-world report that mentioned the negative picture given by the Lebanese survey on Arab readers draws a

somewhat more realistic and practical view on how Arabs read. It reports that although illiteracy is still present across the Arab world, in some Arab countries like Egypt, there is a great interest in books and book fairs. Close to a million visitors attended the Cairo book fair the beginning of 2011. The report continues, "There is a wealth in literary and artistic knowledge production in Arab countries". Al-Sherbini (2010) reports on an initiative taken by Alph Bookstores, a local bookstore in Cairo, to stock taxis with books for clients to read in traffic jams. These "knowledge taxis" were initiated to encourage people to read short stories and poems on their way to their destinations. A taxi driver reports that most of his clients welcomed the idea, and women especially were more enthusiastic. This optimistic project only shows that there is indeed an interest in reading. This also suggests that the reading culture across the Arab world is not uniform and that Arabs have different reading habits.

In defense of the situation of reading in Oman, an Omani sales professional gives a fairly positive picture. He maintains that reading is no longer restricted to hard copies as e-paper formats are accessible to the public. He states that "It's not that people don't read, they just don't read a physical book anymore". Another Omani, an IT professional, agrees stating that people are using the Internet as a source for reading because it is easy to access, cheap, and quick (*Muscat Daily*, 2011). The 2011 Muscat International Book Fair which is an annual event organized since 1992, included over 500 publishers from 25 different countries. The public's interest in this event has increased yearly and has exceeded expectations

The Research

In this study, we depended on questionnaires to collect the participants' views. The participants consist of teachers and students, as will be discussed below; hence, two questionnaires were designed for this study. The teachers' questionnaire aimed at understanding the teachers' perceptions of their students' reading culture by asking them to comment on four statements with YES/NO (see Table 1.). On the other hand, in the students' questionnaire they were required to answer questions regarding their reading habits as well as provide information on their parents' reading abilities and habits (see *Students' reading habits* onwards for the questions). The latter aspect was added to investigate the relationship between parents' literacy level and the students' reading culture to investigate the argument that teachers give concerning the influential factor of the lack of an interest in reading among students' parents, as mentioned in the *Introduction*.

The Participants

This study was conducted at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in the Fall of 2010. Two groups of participants were involved: teachers in the Language Center (LC) and their students who were studying in the Foundation Programme, which helps develop their English before they join their respective colleges.

Teachers

The number of participants involved in this investigation is 53 teachers from the LC at SQU. Omani nationals and Arab teachers were excluded from this study; it was feared that these teachers would have a biased viewpoint regarding this topic due to their shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, only native speakers of English and other languages were involved in this study.

Students

The number of participants involved in this study is 103 students from the same level in the Foundation Programme. The study was administered during the students' first semester at the university, so they may have not had the chance to change their study habits from what they practiced at school. The students were informed that they were involved in a study on their reading habits and that the investigation had nothing to do with class assignments or homework. They were also told that their teachers would have no access to their anonymously filled-in questionnaires in order not to affect their answers due to fear from their teachers' reactions.

Results*Teachers' Perceptions*

The teachers' questionnaire was designed in a way that would take very little time to fill in. The statements were very short and required black and white (Yes/No) answers, so the options did not allow other alternatives or comments. The reason why no grey-area answers were encouraged was to try to reach clear-cut perceptions similar to the ones mentioned in *Introduction* above, where the teachers had direct and certain negative attitudes towards students' reading culture. The idea was to see if other teachers had a similar certainty regarding their beliefs about students' reading habits. However, some teachers did not comment or give an answer to some of the statements; therefore, the 'Uncertain' category in Table 1. below accounts for such cases when the teachers either wrote 'Don't Know' or left the box empty, both of which are considered positive feedback since they indicate that not all teachers have adamant black or white perceptions about students' habits. Furthermore, some teachers added short comments next to some of the statements in the margins of the questionnaire paper, as will be discussed in *Teachers' additional comments* below.

Table 1. Teachers' Perceptions

PERCEPTIONS	YES	NO	UNCERTAIN
Students are reading oriented.	11.3 % (six cases)	88.67 %	None
Students read MORE in their mother tongue.	84.9 %	11.3 % (six cases)	3.77 % (two cases)
Most of the students' parents CAN NOT read in their mother tongue.	9.4 % (five cases)	69.8 %	20.75 %
Most of the students' parents DO NOT read in their mother tongue.	35.8 %	43.39 %	20.75 %

Table 1. shows the teachers' replies to the four statements given in their questionnaire. It yields the following two findings: one concerning students' and the other concerning their parents.

Perception of Omani Students' Reading Habits

The first important finding is that 88.67% of the teachers believe that Omani students are not reading oriented as opposed to 11.3% who believe that students do read for pleasure. There was no specification about which language is referred to in this statement; hence, the statement reads something to the effect of "Students are reading oriented in any language, not specifically English". Therefore, the majority of the teachers' replies indicate that Omani students are not

interested in reading in any language, this overgeneralization is quite a harsh judgment especially that teachers are making it without any substantial evidence besides the students' poor reading skills in English.

The teachers' answers to the second question surprisingly shows that they have a somewhat distorted idea of what having a reading culture means. They give a contradictory picture about the students' reading habits. This time, 84.9% of the teachers state that Omani students read more in their mother tongue. This means that teachers believe that students do indeed have a reading culture but not in English; rather, they prefer reading in their mother tongue. Hence, there is a serious problem in the way teachers understand the concept of "Having a Reading Culture".

It is clear from the teachers' replies to the first statement that they are restricting having an interest in reading to reading in English for the aim of improving students' language proficiency. Therefore, the idea that the majority communicated in the first and second statements is their belief that Omani students are not reading oriented in English, but they are reading oriented in Arabic. Thus, the majority of the participants agree that there is an unequal interest in reading in their mother tongue and in English, favoring the mother tongue. This is a different statement from the common idea shared among teachers that Omani students do not read for pleasure at all. This misconception should therefore be corrected by specifying that Omani students are inclined to read for pleasure more in their mother tongue than in English. Clearly, there seems to be no serious mistake in such favoritism since reading for pleasure in the mother tongue presents less challenges as opposed to reading in second or foreign languages.

Perception of the Parents' Reading Habits

The second important finding in the table above relates to the students' parents. Although the teachers have no apparent means of knowing any information about the parents' reading habits, about 80% of the participants were able to give a Yes/No answer to this question.

The most striking finding is that about a third of the sample, 35.8%, agrees that most of the students' parents do not read for pleasure in their mother tongue. This figure is quite high considering that the judgment being made here is based on a very subjective picture of what goes on in the students' home environment. In contrast, 43.39% of the participants believe that the students' parents do indeed read in their mother tongue. Here again, the teachers are mostly speculating, but the difference here is that this time it is a positive perception. Furthermore, 20.75% of the participants reported that they are uncertain, so they do not provide a comment on this statement. The first finding is perhaps more shocking than the latter two due to the negative implication it contains.

Another surprising finding relates to the parents' literacy ability. Five teachers, 9.4% of the participants, stated that they believe their students' parents are illiterate which is, despite the low percentage, an alarming speculation. On the other hand, the rest of the participants provide a more positive picture on this aspect; 69.8% of the participants believe that students' parents can read in their mother tongue.

Also, the same 20.75% of the teachers participants who stated that they were uncertain about the previous comment, i.e. that concerning whether parents like to read in the mother tongue, reported that they do not know or are uncertain of the parents literacy level. This is a positive input since instead of giving a negative/positive comment, they found it more reasonable to state that they do not know or are simply uncertain of the answer. The fact that teachers do not know information about their students' background is understandable since in Oman, as is the case in some other countries in the Middle East, some teachers and students consider asking about the

home environment an invasion of privacy. What is not understandable is that how some teachers could make baseless judgments about the academic abilities of their students' parents without even meeting them.

Teachers' Additional Comments

A few teachers wrote short comments next to the statements in their questionnaire which revealed different attitudes. Two of the teachers argued that with respect to reading for pleasure, there is a difference between genders. The first teacher merely pointed out that there is a difference, while the second stated that only female students are reading oriented; so according to this teacher, male students do not read for pleasure. Unfortunately, we had not anticipated such a comment from teachers or we would have included a question about gender in the students' questionnaire to investigate this aspect. Another comment gave a guessed estimate of the number of students who are reading oriented. A teacher argued that about 70% of students are reading oriented regardless of their gender. Also, on a different note, another teacher noted that about 50% of the students' parents do not read for pleasure. Finally, a teacher commented that reading the Holy Quran is not considered reading for pleasure, and therefore if students reported that they read the Quran, this should not be considered reading for pleasure. This comment is subject to question since the Quran is a rich source for historic information as well as being the reference of the religion and moral values of Islam. In addition, the first word revealed in the Holy Quran is the word: "Read", which comes as an order to learn and gain wisdom hence emphasizing the importance of reading for Muslims.

It is important to stress here that the above speculations are not based on findings of scientific research; and therefore, cannot be considered objective judgments on the part of the teachers. These comments merely represent impressions reached by these teachers based on personal experiences or observations, which may not be valid. The impact of these ideas, though, is the result of the apparent widespread misunderstanding of the students' habits as will be discussed below.

Students' Reading Habits

As mentioned in *The Research* section above, the students' questionnaire required answers to short and straightforward questions. The following will be an account of what students' reported concerning their own as well as their parents' reading abilities; these accounts will be compared with what the teachers' perceived about these aspects.

Read for Pleasure or Not?

The first aspect under investigation in the students' questionnaire is whether or not the students read for pleasure. Two thirds of the student participants, 68.9%, reported that they indeed read for pleasure. When comparing this finding with the negative perceptions of the majority of the teachers, 88.67 %, we reach a confirmation of the idea that teachers' views regarding students' reading habits are invalid. This huge misperception of students' habits is a worrying indication of a lack of understanding of the students' abilities and background which is a crucial aspect in any teacher-students relationship.

On the other hand, 31% of the student participants stated that they do not read for pleasure, yet the same percentage of students give a contradictory report to this when answering the next question (see below) which means we cannot depend on this figure as a basis for further findings.

Reading in Arabic versus English

The second question in the students' questionnaire focused on whether the students read more in Arabic or English. 83.49% of the student participants reported that they read more in Arabic than in English. This remarkably matches what the teachers perceived concerning this point, for 84.9 % of the teacher participants believe that students read more in their mother tongue, as explained above.

Surprisingly, even the 31% of the student participants who reported that they do not read for pleasure gave a reply to this question, which indicates that this group also practices some form of pleasure reading. It might well be that this 31% of the student participants have a problem identifying what constitutes pleasure reading or do not completely separate between the concept of reading for pleasure as an extra reading activity and their study-related readings; also, they might not see themselves doing enough reading to qualify them to say they are reading for pleasure.

Can Parents Read?

To investigate the notion of a present connection between parents' literacy and lack of a reading culture among Omani youths as mentioned above, the student participants were asked to specify whether their parents can read in Arabic, English or in both languages. Table 2. below gives details about the students' replies. The most intriguing findings are that the majority of the students' mothers, 67.96% of the participants, can read in Arabic alone, while the majority of the students' fathers, 45.6% of the participants, can read in both Arabic and English. Other findings indicate that 41.7% of the students' fathers can read only in Arabic, while 3.88% can read only in English. In general, more students reported that their parents can read in both Arabic and English than those who reported that their parents can read only in English which is understandable. Also, only two cases for each parent gender, 1.9%, were reported as completely illiterate. Comparing this very small percentage with what the 9.4% of the teacher participants reported concerning their belief that the majority of their students' parents cannot read is indicative of how alarming and incorrect this attitude is.

Table 2. *Can Parents Read*

Parents' Literacy: Can Parents Read?	ARABIC	ENGLISH	BOTH	NO
Mother	67.96 %	0.97 % (one case)	13.59 %	1.9 % (two cases)
Father	41.7 %	3.88 % (four cases)	45.6 %	1.9 % (two cases)

International Human Development Indicators (2011) report an estimate by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics in 2010 that reveals an 86.3% literacy rate in Oman for both genders above the age of 15. This estimate is quite close to the illiteracy statistics reached in the latest census in Oman in 2010. Ali Al Raisi, Director General of the Census Department in Oman, states that the illiteracy rate of the Omani population dropped from 21.9 % in 2003 to 12.2 % in 2010 (Vaidya, 2010). It is noteworthy that this increase in literacy in Oman goes far back to 1993. According to a bulletin produced by the Omani Ministry of National Economy in 2009, the 1993 census revealed an illiteracy level of 41.3%. This drop of illiteracy from 41.3% to 21.9% to 12.2% since 1993 until 2010 indicates anything but a lack of a culture of reading. It is also worth noting that the bulletin reports a higher level of illiteracy among females than males across different age groups in the 1993 and 2003 censuses. However, for the 2010 census such comparison has not been published. Nevertheless, this confirms the finding reached in this study concerning the fact that 67.96% of the students' mothers are literate. It is clear that the increase in literacy among

Omanis is an obvious indication that illiteracy is not a prominent factor affecting the reading culture of today's university students, for the majority of their parents are literate.

Do Parents Encourage Reading for Pleasure?

The fourth question focused on whether the students' parents encourage them to read for pleasure. The majority of answers, 78.6%, were positive, yet 20.38% of the participants reported that their parents do not encourage them to read. It is clear that the majority of the students' parents understand the importance of reading for pleasure and therefore support it in the home environment; nonetheless, the fact that 20.38% of the parents do not support reading for pleasure is an alarming indication that some of the students' parents are playing a negative role in the students' education. It is possible that these parents see reading for pleasure as a waste of time and a distraction from academic studies.

What Students Lately Read

The fifth and final question in the questionnaire asked the students to identify what they had lately read. Table 3. below provides details of their replies. The Internet is the most common source of reading as 39.8% reported; also, books and newspapers are common reading materials for 33% and 30.9% of the students respectively. Arabic short stories were reported by 5.8% of the participants as another reading interest. Furthermore, there are individual cases which reported reading English short stories, magazines, The Holy Quran, and novels (represented in 'Other' in Table 3. below).

Table 3. Read Lately

BOOK	NEWSPAPER	INTERNET	ARABIC SHORT STORY	OTHER
33 %	30.09 %	39.8 %	5.8 %	0.97 % (one case each)

The fact that all the student participants gave a source for their reading is a second confirmation that their answer to the first question, discussed in *Read for pleasure or not?* above, is indicative of a lack of understanding of what constitutes reading for pleasure (see also *Reading in Arabic versus English* above).

Conclusion

The main finding of this study suggests that there is a patent misunderstanding of the meaning of "The Reading Culture" or "Being Reading Oriented" among educators and the public. Findings of the teachers' questionnaire in this study suggest that English teachers at the university level in Oman define the concept of having a reading culture as: having an interest or inclination to read in English regardless of any attempt to read in the mother tongue, which explains why 88.67 % of the teacher participants believe that Omani students are not reading oriented on the one hand and why 84.9 % of these participants believe that Omani students read more in their mother tongue, on the other. This contradiction is an obvious indication of a lack of an understanding of the students' backgrounds, their interests and of the true meaning of pleasure reading. Another important finding is that even some students do not know what reading for pleasure means as discussed in *Read for Pleasure or Not*, *Read in Arabic versus English* and *What Students Read* sections described above.

Therefore, we can sum up by stating that the views that the majority of English teachers have regarding the lack of a reading culture among Omani youths are invalid and can only be justified

as stemming from the teachers' frustrations regarding the general lack of an interest in reading in English since many students are not improving their English language Skills as quickly as their teachers would hope. The fact that an idea is reiterated and widely accepted as being true does not make it so; thus, rather than spreading outdated or unsubstantial information about the reading abilities and family backgrounds of a particular group of students, which are in most cases based on a personal interpretation rather than current studies, we need as educators to do what we preach: read, investigate, and understand.

Recommendations

Defining the problem is key. By amending the definition of the problem, we can focus on the correct issue. If the problem is that Omani students cannot read, then we need to find better ways to develop their reading skills or give them more time to practice reading. However, if the problem is not having any enthusiasm to read specific materials, then we need to define the types of materials they find challenging in order to make alterations or introduce new more engaging materials. If the material we expect students to enjoy reading is limited to reading English books such as novels, short stories and articles, then we should redefine the problem and not over-generalize the lack of reading such sources to all sources of information.

Parents have been made responsible for encouraging their children to read for pleasure. Bayless asserts that enhancing enthusiastic reading is the role of the family and culture, starting from the early years of (0 to 6 years), but can also be accomplished at later years (Ennis, 1965 as cited in Bayless, 2010, p. 12). Parents can help achieve a reading culture through specific behaviors and activities that require 'time, persistence and consistency'. According to the Program for International Student Assessment (2007), a study of fifty- seven countries, including America, supports the importance of the home environment for better performance. Bayless argues that schools can teach the skill of reading effectively, but the family is responsible for exercising the skill and providing children with the inspiration and desire to read; therefore, schools and families reinforce each other's work (2010, p. 16).

But some parents may see reading for pleasure as a waste of time and a distraction from academic studies. Here comes the role of teachers and the curriculum to enhance the use of extracurricular material for class assignments. There is a need to develop more pragmatic reading practices such as critical reading exercises both inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, instead of widening the gap between teachers and students by stopping at misperceptions and pondering on the reasons, we need to bridge the gap through using new types of materials and media for reading. Teachers can use digital books, newspapers and magazines to encourage students to read as these are more accessible, easier to handle, and cheaper than paper copies.

Researchers and educators have not saved an effort to show us how to grow or enhance a reading culture. Onwubiko (2010) asserts that it is the responsibility of institution heads and teachers in addition to parents to encourage children to read as reading broadens their 'understanding of life'. Onwubiko (2010) concludes that school heads and teachers can cultivate a reading culture in many ways. First, making changes in the curricula can create more interest in acquiring knowledge. For example, instead of using only course books in class, newspapers and educational magazines can provide reinforcement for civic knowledge. Second, parents' interest can be raised through extra-curricular activities such as drama or public debates in which their children are involved. Also, schools can raise funds to support their libraries and organize reading and writing competitions for students. Finally, schools can collaborate with publishing companies to support their students and libraries. Onwubiko stresses the role of schools heads

and teachers in creating a reading climate for children. He therefore does not believe that the lack of interest in reading is the sole responsibility of the parents as parents also need to be educated as to the best means to encourage reading in the home environment (see also Bayless (2009) on how to grow a reading culture).

It is obvious that there is a general misunderstanding of the term reading culture among the public as well as professionals which is causing people to have very different and somewhat prejudicial views against the reading culture of specific groups of people. Omani youths, as an example of Arab readers, read more in their mother tongue than in English, which does not make them less reading oriented than any other culture. The time has come for teachers and the public to think pragmatically and leave baseless impressions behind, so rather than hammering on a false and negative perception about a given culture, objective solutions should be presented to rectify what is believed to be in need of repair. Maybe the problem lies in our own beliefs and maybe we think a group of people is behind in many ways because our own knowledge about them is lacking.

About the Author

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