

Establishing a Reading Culture in Arabic and English in Oman

Rahma Al-Mahrooqi

Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Postgraduate Studies and Research,
Sultan Qaboos University, Oman
PO Box 17, Al-Khoud, PC123, Sultanate of Oman

Christopher Denman

Humanities Research Centre, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman
PO Box 50, Al-Khoud, PC123, Sultanate of Oman

Abstract

Within the Arab Gulf nation of Oman, reading skills in both Arabic and English are often associated with academic achievement, social success, and the development of life-long learning skills. In this context, reading is closely linked with a number of benefits, including school readiness and participation, learner motivation and self-confidence, employability and social mobility, future happiness, and the willingness and ability of individuals to take an active and constructive role in society. Despite this, Oman, like many of the other Arab nations, has been characterized as largely lacking a reading culture in either Arabic or English. Recent reforms and initiatives in the country have sought to improve learners' reading skills and to take the first steps towards establishing a genuine reading culture. This paper, therefore, begins by exploring some of the potential personal, social, and economic benefits that may be accrued through the establishment of a reading culture as supported by these reforms, before detailing some of the challenges that need to be addressed for this to be achieved. It ends by arguing for the need for various stakeholders to work together to design and implement a nation-wide reading program to help improve the quality of education in the country, and to also allow Oman to continue its path of development as a globally-competitive, stable, and dynamic nation.

Keywords: Arabic, benefits of reading, English, Oman, reading culture, reading programs

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Introduction

Improving the quality of education can contribute to long-term individual, social and economic gains that can have a profound impact on personal fulfillment, national competitiveness, growth, and development. Despite these potential advantages, Coughlan (2015) states that a global school ranking from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) based on a variety of international assessment tools such as the Pisa and the TIMSS tests, places Oman as among the five lowest-ranked nations in terms of students' math and science results. In addition, a recent report by Education First (2015) claims that Omanis have "very low" levels of English proficiency based on an on-line language test, and that Oman was ranked 58th out of 70 countries worldwide in this regard. Similar findings indicating the underperformance of both Omani and other Arab learners in reading and literacy skills have also been reported in the literature (Al-Mahrooqi, Asante, & Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2010; Bell, 2001). Authors such as O'Sullivan (2009) claim that, as Arabic is a diglossic tongue with colloquial Arabic effectively acting as a first language for many in the Arab world, Arab students' Standard Arabic reading abilities are often at a second language level. As a result, these learners may be graduating from schools with significant problems reading in both Standard Arabic and English. Evidence reporting the poor reading skills of Omani learners is even more alarming when the massive investment the country has made in education reform, as exemplified by the introduction of the Basic Education system in 1998/1999, is considered.

Coughlan (2015) cites the OECD estimation that Oman could experience GDP growth of more than 1400% over the lifetime of current school students if all learners are enrolled in schools and manage to achieve at least basic academic skills. In addition to the potential for significant economic growth, the development of basic math, science, and reading skills also offers a number of societal and personal benefits. Focusing on reading skills in both English and Arabic, a highly literate population tends to be more creative, more involved in community and social matters, better connected with the globalized world, and, ultimately, more likely to take an informed and active role in society thereby contributing to social cohesion and development. This is an especially important concern considering the events of the Arab Spring and their destabilizing effects on a number of nations of the Arab world (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016). On the individual level, enhanced literacy skills can also help make people better rounded individuals who are empathic, have fewer prejudices, and are open to experiences that continue to nurture and shape their identities and their understandings of their place in the world (see Abu Russ, 2010; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Amer, 2003; Whiteley, 2011).

However, despite the way reading can contribute to individual and social well-being and economic development, it is widely claimed that Oman, like most other Arab nations, lacks a reading culture. For example, the Arab Thought Foundation Fikr (cited in Al-Yacoub, 2012) maintains that the average Arab child only reads around 6 minutes a year compared to the average Western child's 12,000 minutes. The situation for adults is little better. For example, Ayish (2010) claims that that the average European reads around 35 books every year, while the equivalent of only one book is read by every 80 Arabs in the same period. A variety of reasons have been put forth for this apparent lack of reading culture in Arab nations, including the relative late arrival of formal education systems, a lack of libraries, a strong oral culture, Arabic's diglossic nature, high rates of adult illiteracy, social instability, and traditional teaching methods that value memorization and recitation over active engagement with written text (Al-

Mahrooqi, Asante, & Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2010; Al-Mahrooqi, Denman, & Sultana, in press; Emam, Kazem, Al-Said, Al-Maamary, & Al-Mandhari, 2014; Emenyeonu, 2012; O'Sullivan, 2009; Magin, 2010; Wyatt, 2012). However, given Omani students' continued poor academic performance as highlighted above, and the detrimental effect this can have on economic development, social stability, and personal fulfillment (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016), it is vital that reading habits and skills in both Arabic and English, as the foundation upon which successful education is built, be instilled in Omani learners in particular and across Omani society more generally. One of the most important ways this can be achieved is through the introduction of a nation-wide, multi-stakeholder program that establishes and promotes a vivacious reading culture in the country.

The Benefits of Reading

The development of reading skills in both Arabic and English is necessarily associated with academic achievement, success, and life-long learning skills in those Arab nations, such as Oman, where Arabic is the medium of instruction in public schools and where English dominates instruction at the tertiary level. Reading is strongly linked with academic success (Cullinan, 2000). Capwell (2012) maintains that children who are exposed to books from an early age have higher rates of school readiness which generally benefits them for the rest of their academic careers and lives. Reading and being read to also increase learners' vocabulary ranges, listening and language skills, attention and curiosity, in addition to their abilities to recognize letters, pictures and numbers. The development of reading skills improves brain capacity for language and literacy skills. When parents help their children to read books, Capwell claims that an emotional and physical bonding experience occurs which offers a range of psychological and physical benefits, while these positive early reading experiences also increase children's chances of success, achievement and future happiness both during their school days and in the future. Moreover, Terlitsky and Wilkins (2015) claim that reading can improve children's levels of happiness and confidence while also decreasing emotional and conduct problems. On the other hand, Emam et al. (2014) claim that those children who have a delayed or disordered acquisition of reading skills – such as could be argued to exist for many learners across Oman - continue to struggle with their reading skills later in life. They also have less exposure to content knowledge, vocabulary, and other reading and academic skills. Moreover, Emam et al. continue, those learners who are poor readers by the end of the first grade may not be able to develop even average-level reading skills by the end of their elementary schooling without substantial remediation efforts and intervention.

Noor (2011) adds that, through reading, students gain the new information and knowledge that is at the heart of their education. Loan (2009) also emphasizes the importance of reading by claiming that it can expand students' perceptions and choices. According to Shoebottom (2015), reading helps students to perceive ideas and understand sentences and arguments – a supposition he supports by the claim that educational researchers have found a strong relationship between reading, vocabulary levels, and academic success. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education (2005, cited in Afterschool Alliance, 2013) states that reading helps students improve their learning skills and, subsequently, achieve higher scores and grades. According to Guthrie (2008), those who read regularly and widely tend to be “higher achievers” than those who do not. Further, Palani (2012) believes that comprehension skills, which are largely developed through reading, contribute directly to educational success in addition to

improving thinking skills and the ability to generate new ideas – an essential component of critical thinking and creativity. Miller (2013, cited in Afterschool Alliance, 2013, p. 6) supports this supposition by stating that students who read frequently tend to be better spellers, writers and thinkers. Owusu-Acheaw and Larson (2014) also highlight the poor exam performance of students who are not interested in reading and cite several studies that link students' reading habits to academic performance.

In addition to its links to academic success, Jenkins (1967) highlights the ways in which reading is central to pleasure and personal development. The author claims that people read at four levels. That is, they associate words with sounds, read for the literal meaning of the text, interpret what is read, and encounter new ideas and experiences. While Jenkins claims that very young readers will derive pleasure from the recognition of words and that those who are reading for a specific purpose will enjoy encountering the facts they seek, it is the emotional investment in the text and the broadening of experiences that will help readers enjoy the text most. Here, Jenkins offers the belief that:

Reading presents human nature – the best, the worst, the in-between for inspection and study. The great range of diverse, diffuse and divergent ways in which we human beings have acted and thought, and are capable of acting and thinking, are laid bare. Perhaps it even exceeds the personal example in shaping character (p. 406).

Personal character is shaped, according to Jenkins (1967), by reliving significant events and moments in history through another's perspective – hence helping develop a sense of empathy while also broadening horizons and understandings of historical and contemporary events. Reading also allows people to find beauty and fantasy in environments which they may never experience and to obtain what the author describes as "vicarious stability" even in those situations where such stability may be lacking in their own lives. According to Rebeck (2015), people who read experience higher levels of self-esteem and self-acceptance while also experiencing greater ease in making decisions and planning. The author continues that avid readers are less likely to experience difficulties with their moods or feelings of depression. Clark and Rumbold (2006) also claim that readers are more confident than those who do not read and that reading can help people extend their knowledge and understanding of other cultures and communities. This allows readers, according to Rebeck, to more easily communicate with others and to talk without hesitation. Clark and Rumbold continue that readers also generally participate more in their communities and understand other cultures better than those who do not read. In terms of culture, Holte (1998) maintains that reading can increase an understanding of life's value while also promoting the maintenance of cultural heritage.

Carter-Jones (2015) offers a similar stance to Jenkins in that she considers reading to be both an individual and imaginative act that takes place in the learner's inner world. The author likens reading to a journey in which the reader can enhance their ways of seeing, knowing and experiencing some of life's many complexities. In addition, the act of reading allows readers to develop their knowledge base and to create value – essential elements for living what the author describes as a fulfilling life. In this way, reading can both guide and shape students as people who are capable of moving beyond their own boundaries which, the author contends, often consist of stereotypes, prejudices and other biases. Carter-Jones also maintains that reading

allows people to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and to become active members of society and critical thinkers who are capable of evaluating ideas and thoughts, words, and actions of others and to compare and contrast these with their own. As a result, learners are able to explore their values and to critically explore these in ways that allow them to develop their characters to become successful members of global society. Lapp, Moss, Grant, and Johnson (2015) claim that reading can contribute to the development of lifelong learning success, while UNESCO (n.d.) states that it is these lifelong learning skills in general, and literacy skills in particular, that allow people to actively participate in society, thereby contributing to societal happiness and general well-being. In addition to these psychological and social benefits, reading can also offer a number of physical advantages. For example, the National Library of New Zealand (n.d.), citing a research report from the University of Sussex, states that reading can improve people's health by slowing their heart rates and reducing their levels of stress and tension.

Wren (2001) offers a framework of the cognitive foundations of learning to read that explicitly highlights the various areas in which reading allows learner development to occur. This framework incorporates a number of elements. The first of these is reading comprehension which is defined as the ability to construct linguistic meaning from written text. Wren divides this ability into the two competencies of language comprehension, or the ability to understand spoken representations of language, and decoding which involves recognizing written representations of a word. Language comprehension naturally encompasses a variety of interrelated abilities. These include linguistic knowledge, or the understanding of a language's formal structures (including phonology, syntax, and semantics), and background knowledge which is an individual's knowledge of the world (including content and procedural knowledge). Combining these two abilities, Wren continues, allows people to move beyond literal interpretation and to "read between the lines" or make inferences from available information.

Decoding, described by Wren (2001) as involving the ability to recognize relationships between written and spoken words, is vital for word recognition and is related to such abilities as cipher knowledge – knowledge of the relationships between the units of written words and those of spoken words – and lexical knowledge involving an awareness of those cases where the relationships between the units of spoken and written words do not follow a systematic pattern. These two forms of knowledge are themselves built upon a number of abilities including letter knowledge, phoneme awareness, knowledge of the alphabetical principle (i.e. understanding that systematic relationships exist between the internal structures of written and spoken words and that learning words requires discovering this relationship), and understanding that printed text is associated with linguistic meaning and so on. It is through engaging in reading that these abilities are developed, with children who are not active readers failing to develop many of these to the kinds of levels that they need for educational and social success both during their school lives and in their social and professional futures.

Terlitsky and Wilkins (2015) offer a summary of the reported benefits of the implementation of literacy programmes involving a diverse range of literacy and behavior interventions that seek the involvement of entire families. These benefits are concentrated on improvements in children's literacy skills and behaviour and can even improve overall levels of parenting skills. Examples of some of the interventions that have been employed by programs

such as the Parent-Child Home Program (PCHP), the Parent Empowerment for Family Literacy Project (PEFaL), Paired Reading (PR), Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP), and the Adrienne Kirby Family Literacy Project, include home visitors that model reading activities for parents such as how to engage children with books or toys, instructing parents in how to make story bags and to effectively participate in child activities, showing parents videos that demonstrate paired reading with children in addition to receiving verbal and written instructions about the process, weekly literacy sessions where group leaders demonstrate various literacy strategies for parents, literacy mentoring programs for parents in which they receive bags of materials to support reading at home, making available literacy workshops in which parents learn book sharing techniques such as questioning, using different tones and so on. The positive literacy and behavior outcomes of these, and other suggested, courses of action described by Terlitsky and Wilkins are many and include the development of literacy skills and knowledge about books from an early age, increased reading enjoyment, improved personal and social skills and learner independence, increased reading fluency, increased levels of confidence and happiness, higher levels of academic achievement, improved child-parent relationships, more motivation to read and write, and decreased emotional and conduct problems.

Reading in the Arab World and Oman

In the Arab world, it is often reported that reading cultures largely do not exist. For example, as stated above, it has been claimed that the average European reads around 35 books a year while the average Arab reads only a small fraction of one. Moreover, Western children generally read for around 12,000 minutes a year while Arab children read for around 6 minutes (see Al-Yacoub, 2012). Of the studies that have been conducted to examine reading habits among Arabs, similar trends to those claimed here have been reported. For example, authors such as Bell (2001), Cobb and Horst (2001), and Abu Shmais (2002) highlight how many Arab EFL learners struggle with reading due to the variety of factors discussed above. These factors combine to contribute to a general weakness in the reading skills of Arab learners. In the Sultanate of Oman, Al Yaaqubi and Al-Mahrooqi's (2013) investigation of university-level English majors reported that most participants read around one-and-a-half books a semester, while around 20% did not even read one book during that timeframe – a finding that leads the authors to claim “the reading culture overall is very weak” (p. 37). In addition to their struggles with reading in English, student reading in Arabic across the Arab world has also been reported as being underdeveloped to the extent that it negatively impacts upon academic performance. Authors such as Al-Mahrooqi, Asante, and Abrar-ul-Hassan (2010), O'Sullivan (2009), and Bouzenirh (1991) have highlighted how this lack of reading ability in Arabic has a negative impact on learners' English reading skills as positive transfer of these skills between languages is not possible.

Rajab and Al-Sadi's (2015) study of 330 EFL university students in Saudi Arabia reports that participants largely lack pleasure in reading and that this is especially true for English-language texts. Wischenbart (2011) adds that Emirati students generally prefer to read online books than printed ones, while O'Sullivan (2009) observed that students in the UAE's Higher College of Technology often hold poor attitudes towards reading, in addition to limited knowledge of reading strategies. These factors, the author continues, combine to result in below average reading performance for these students in both English and Arabic. Arab readers have been characterized as generally slow readers who often have insufficient levels of

comprehension, a lack of word recognition, and limited vocabulary (Bell, 2001). Arab readers of English have also been reported as being overly dependent on textual information and to be unable to locate a passage's main ideas. While insufficient linguistic ability plays a part in this, a lack of world knowledge and specific cultural knowledge also plays a major role (Cobb, 1999; Mourtaga, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2010). Underlying all these problems is the absence of a reading culture in most Arab societies (Al-Mahrooqi, Asante, & Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2010; Bouzenirh, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2010; Shannon, 2003).

Even when encouraged to undertake extensive reading in English, learners usually do not feel motivated to do so because they connect all types of reading to academic study – an activity that gives them no pleasure and which thus prevents a transfer of skill from one language to the other (Wurr, 2003). Writing about UAE students, O'Sullivan (2010, para. 6) states:

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 [Higher Colleges of Technology] students. Students are not interested in reading and at best are only instrumentally motivated to read for very 'narrow' purposes and do not do a lot of recreational reading.

Mourtaga (2006), describing Palestinian students, claims that they find reading in English to be a complicated process and that they experience many problems with it. These problems are associated with outdated teaching methods, inadequate language proficiency, and differences between English and Arabic. To this list, O'Sullivan (2009) adds poor attitudes towards reading, a lack of reading in Arabic, and poor reading strategies. With specific reference to the Sultanate of Oman, since 1970 one of the main focuses of government education and development efforts has been the creation of an educated and literate society. Some great strides have been made towards achieving this, with the rate of illiteracy among all Omanis decreasing to around 28.3% percent as of 2000 with this figure being as low as 2.1% for those aged between 15 and 24 (Magin, 2010).

However, despite these developments, the issues of a lack of reading culture and poor attitudes towards reading found elsewhere in the Arab world can also be witnessed in Oman. For example, Al Yaaqubi and Al-Mahrooqi's (2013) investigation of 66 Department of English students in the country's only public university reported that participants rarely read for pleasure, even though arts students did read slightly more than English education and translation students. Moreover, Al-Mahrooqi and Al-Wahaibi (2012) found that the majority of the university-level students in their Omani study also held negative views of literature before taking literature courses. Al-Musalli (2014) adds that reading in either Arabic or English is often not appreciated by Omani students due to a number of reasons including the lack of libraries, still relatively high levels of parental illiteracy, and the excessive amount of homework they receive. Despite this, Al-Musalli notes that some people believe that reading in general in Oman is not the issue, but rather the reading of printed books as students are more likely to prefer e-books and other on-line sources. However, a number of authors, such as Emenyeonu (2012) argue that the lack of reading culture, in both Arabic and English, is one of the most serious challenges associated with the introduction of more effective teaching and learning in the sultanate.

Developing English and Arabic Reading Skills

Given the lack of reading culture in Oman and the potential disadvantages that this can bring both Omani students and wider society, it is important that systematic steps be taken to increase the levels of reading in both Standard Arabic and English. Snow, Burn and Griffin (1998) highlight the ways in which learner development in their first language can fully support the development of academic performance, including linguistic and even mathematical skills, in another language. In offering support for the supposition that developing a learner's mother tongue actively supports their development even when those learners use different languages at school, the authors claim that "a student whose mother tongue is well supported and continuing to develop and expand will have greater success in learning other languages" (p. 102). The authors maintain that students who are active in the study and development of their mother tongue achieve higher academic standards and also develop their English language skills faster than those who are not. Moreover, Snow et al. also report that studies in a mother tongue are the most important distinguishing factor in English performance over time. For these reasons, the authors claim that it is important for programs to help students continue the development of their mother tongue while studying in English-medium environments. In relation to the current paper, this implies that if Arab students do not continue to read widely in Arabic due to a focus on English reading, their cognitive development may stagnate or even deteriorate. In addition, engaging in extensive reading has also been reported as having positive effects on oral fluency and communicative competence (Jones, 2010) – skills that recent research, as reported above, have highlighted as often lacking in Omani school graduates and subsequently negatively impacting upon their levels of employability (see Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016).

Urlaub (2008) continues that proficient readers demonstrate evidence of being able to transfer sophisticated reading comprehension strategies between first and second languages, thereby supporting the importance of developing learners' reading skills in Arabic as a means of enhancing their English reading skills. Roberts (1994), summarizing evidence from a variety of studies, offers the following examples of literacy skills that can be transferred from a first language into a second language. These include low-level skills such as directionality, sequencing, an understanding of decoding and the correspondence between symbols and sounds, and higher level skills such as an awareness of rhetorical devices, textual structure, the different purposes of reading and writing, in addition to being able to predict and provide information. Other skills that can be transferred from a first language to a second language offered by Roberts include the ability to construct meaning and hypothesize, and having confidence in reading and writing abilities.

Although Roberts (1994) claims that these results are often based on studies that focus on English as the second language being acquired and often use summative program evaluation as evidence of acquisition, it should be noted that recent investigations also tend to support the potential for the transfer of reading skills between first and second languages. Sparks, Patton, Ganschow and Humbach (2009) detail a number of these, including Proctor, August, Carlo and Snow's (2006) study of Spanish-speaking school learners which reported that more efficient L2 readers benefit more from their first language vocabulary knowledge than less fluent readers. Sparks et al.'s own longitudinal study of students in a rural public school in the United States over a 10-year period also reported that the early development of reading skills in a first language is strongly linked with reading skills in a second language and that the transfer of these skills may be an important source of differences in the reading abilities of individual second language learners.

Policymakers in Oman have begun to recognize how the establishment of a reading culture in the country is one way in which some of the deficits associated with the current education system can be addressed. Two of the best-known innovations that have sought to increase the levels of reading in Oman are Kidsread and the Sindbad Children's Mobile Library. The former of these is a program introduced by the British Council, with the support of HSBC and in partnership with the Ministry of Education, that sought to advance reading skills and habits among Omani children. The official launch of the program took place in 2011 and has since reached approximately 3,000 children around the sultanate. The program has been implemented in 18 public schools in the Seeb, Al Khuwair, Ruwi, Mattrah, Athaiba, Al Mabella, Dhagmar, Quriyat and Al Amerat districts, and seeks to develop learners' joy in reading by increasing direct parental involvement in reading, in addition to offering teachers courses by international experts in storytelling and by establishing reading rooms with around 100 books in participating schools. By directly involving parents, the program also seeks to improve their reading skills and to deepen the existence of a reading culture in the country. The Sindbad Children's Mobile Library, sponsored by Khimji Ramdas as part of the group's drive for social responsibility, was introduced in 2014 and also seeks to help develop a reading culture in the country. As the name suggests, this initiative features a mobile library that travels around Oman to provide access to books to those who live in communities that often do not have libraries or even bookstores. While both of these initiatives have potentially contributed to the development of a reading culture in Oman, it is important that these efforts are extended across the sultanate in an systematic and prolonged manner.

Conclusion

Despite the potential success that these programs could have in promoting the development of a reading culture in Oman through the number of people they can reach, their impact has been necessarily limited by a relative lack of funding and/or by the limited scope with which they can operate. Within this scope, however, these programs have demonstrated how they are capable of enhancing the reading habits of people around Oman. In doing so, they have offered an example of how reading programs can contribute to Oman's ambitions of achieving at least some of the six goals of UNESCO's (2015) "Education for All" campaign. These include expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programs, achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults, and improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

However, for these goals to be truly achieved, it is necessary that a nation-wide reading program be designed and implemented with the input of a variety of stakeholders. Given the wide array of potential benefits of establishing a reading culture in the country, these stakeholders can be identified as belonging to almost every part of society, and should include, at the very least, students, parents, community members, school teachers, administrators of academic institutions, representatives of local and international businesses, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Education, and the sultanate's Supreme Education Council. Depending on the exact nature of the program that is designed, parents and community members

could be asked to offer financial donations in addition to offering their time to act as readers, mentors, supervisors, administrators and so on. Stakeholders can also be asked to contribute books, while representative from schools and other academic institutions can be asked to set aside space and resources. The ministries of education and higher education and the Supreme Education Council can be asked to provide financial assistance as well as their full backing for the implementation of the program nation-wide, while local businesses can be requested to provide financial donations and to lend their administrative support and access to the networks that will be necessary to allow a nation-wide program to be effectively implemented.

It is through the cooperation of these, and other concerned, stakeholders that a concerted and prolonged effort can be made to establish a genuine reading culture in Oman through the implementation of a nation-wide program that will allow the country and its people to begin to overcome some of the barriers associated with reading highlighted above. Although the exact nature of the reading program will necessarily be negotiated between stakeholders, at the very least it should seek to ensure that students reading in both Standard Arabic and English is improved in terms of both frequency and depth. By promoting a love of reading among students, the reading culture that is established among younger generations will, with time, filter throughout wider society and allow Oman and Omanis to access some of the potential personal, social, and economic benefits that such a culture offers. This is a fundamental step in improving the quality of education in the country, and also of allowing Oman to continue its path towards development which seeks to make the sultanate a globally-competitive, stable, and dynamic nation.

Dr. Rahma Al-Mahrooqi is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Postgraduate Studies and Research at Sultan Qaboos University. She specializes in English language teaching, reading, and sociolinguistics and has published widely in these areas in Oman and internationally.

Dr. Christopher Denman is a researcher at Sultan Qaboos University's Humanities Research Centre. In addition to Oman, he has worked in secondary and tertiary institutions in Australia, South Korea, and Japan. His research interests include language and identity and education policy.

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