

My Reading autobiography

Reading in Elementary Schooling:

Reading in this grade was taught in traditional setting, where the teacher prescribed everything to be read. Students at this age rarely read out of their curiosity or interests. They were encouraged to only follow their instructors' guidelines, and not to worry about things outside their classrooms. In line with the school's approach, my parents thought that reading was to be best served only by the school curriculum. They considered reading newspapers, stories, or any other extra materials as merely wasting of time. During this period, I was completely left to my own and school curriculum. None of my family members helped me with my reading. I used to read from the schoolbooks and answer the reading questions. Though I did all the assigned reading, I had never been enthusiastic to read about predetermined topics such as those assigned by my teachers. I should acknowledge, however, that schooling in this grade must have been effective since I can describe my ability to read at that time as "very good". My elementary teachers recognized that my reading level was higher than some of the average school students. Villagers in our area used to ask me to read letters they received from their sons who joined the Saudi Army and found no other communication media but corresponding by exchanging letters with their sons. When I think about it now, I found it difficult for my son who is in the same age and grade as I was at that time to read letters from this type. Is the elementary schooling deteriorating in our country or what?!

Reading in High School

The first three years in junior-high school and the last three years of high school were not so much different from my experience with reading in the elementary school. Teachers continued to assign predetermined reading topics that made me feel frustrated and uncomfortable. I started to skip some of the reading assignments, which I wasn't interested in (e.g., readings that involved topics with no prior background knowledge such as topics talking about religious and historic issues). Though I did not like to read most of my school assignments, I started to read storybooks given to me by one of my brothers when he came on weekends

and holidays. At this grade, I can only think of one teacher who, I think, played a significant role in my reading. This teacher used to ask me to read a book in a religious or historic issue and then summarize it in two pages in order to read it in front of the school during the morning parade. Sometimes, when the topic was of a religious nature, he asked me to read it in front of prayers in Friday's prayer congregation. This, I believe, helped me learn scanning and skimming strategies when searching for the important parts in the book to summarize as well as the confidence I got from reading to a large number of audience.

Reading at the University Level:

Reading at the university level was different from that in elementary and high schools. My major was Arabic, which means that I had to read a lot on Arabic literature and poetry. I read novels such as "*A Sparrow from the East*" by Tawfeeq Al-Hakeem, "*The Days*" by Taha Hussein, "*Al-Thulathiyah*" by Najeeb Mahfouz "*I Forgot I am a Woman*" and "*The Empty Pillow*" by Ihsan Abdulqaddous and some other novels. I also read the poetry of Abo Tammam, Al-Motanabbi, Jareer, and AlFarazdaq in addition to many Islamic and history books. Professors assigned some of these novels and poetry and some were optional for pleasure and entertainment. My reading habit was completely different from that in previous grades. I felt that I had to increase my knowledge regarding my major and therefore should read extra materials related to my major other than that assigned as courses' requirements. I therefore subscribed to a number of scholarly journals and to a number of magazines. In addition, I felt the need of knowing what was going in the world, especially issues related to politics and economic. To meet this need, I read like I never did before most of the specialized Arabic newspapers and magazines. Discussions with students on campus, after classes, were the main trigger for reading about these issues. I wanted to participate and looked good when discussing these types of topics.

Experience with L2 Reading in Saudi Arabia

In public schools in Saudi Arabia, students are taught English from the first year of their three-year junior high school, until the last year of their three-year high school. In other words, Saudi students learn English for six years, starting in the 7th grade and ending in the 12th grade. Throughout each grade level, students are taught

English for four periods a week and each period last for 45 minutes. Though I went through this process, I still believe that the 6 years I had spent studying English in Saudi Arabia should not be counted towards my experience in English since what I was taught, at that time, was only ideas about basic English uses.

English teaching methods in Saudi classes were traditional, mostly following the audio-lingual method.

Teachers in middle and high schools rarely give students reading assignments. Unlike my experience with L1 outside the school, I did not read any books in my L2. The only outside- classroom pleasure reading activity that I remember was Charles Dicken's "Great expectation". I bought the book because it was a story, but wasn't able to read it.

Experience with L2 Reading in the US.

I started studying English in the English Language Center (ELC) at Michigan State University (MSU) in spring 1995 before I was able to meet the university language proficiency requirement (i.e. TOEFL). In spite of learning English for six years, I found reading in English very hard when I first arrived. One paragraph would take from 1-2 hours of my time to read and comprehend. It was a big shock for me to discover that the English I learned in Saudi Arabia did not qualify me even for reading one paragraph in English. I found myself faced with a totally new experience in English. Everything was completely different from the orthography to the directionality of reading and writing. Instead of reading and writing from right to left, which is the case in Arabic, I had to train myself to read and write from left to right.

The first reading assignment I had to do at the ELC, as I remember, was to read about a topic of my choice and bring it to class to be shared with other students. My topic was about "culture shock". I read about this topic and shared my experience with culture shock when I first came to the United States.

As for reading outside the classroom, I used to only read assigned chapters from the reading books. Homework assigned by The ELC teachers occupied most of my time. Other than that, I rarely read unless it was assigned by teachers except for some local newspapers.

When the university requirements were satisfied, I enrolled for graduate courses at the MA level. I found that something wrong was going on with my reading. Things were just not right. Lots of reading assignments and I was only able to read few of them. It took me ages to successfully finish reading few chapters with full comprehension.

Analysis of My Self as a Reader:

As the case with most L2 learners, Reading in L1 is not as troublesome as it is with a second language.

Therefore, I will only talk about problems encountered with my second language reading.

When I first came to the United States, Reading was the second most difficult skill after writing that I had to struggle with. Reading a short passage was as difficult as someone can imagine. Since the purpose of learning my second language was to pursue my graduate studies in the United States, most of my L2 readings were exclusively devoted for academic purposes. Reading for pleasure was at the bottom of my reading list. The following are some of the problems I faced with my L2 reading:

- *Poor or incomplete comprehension:* I always found it difficult to completely comprehend some reading passages.
- *Reading speed difficulties:* I have a tendency in L2 reading to slow down and re-read what I don't comprehend. At the graduate level, I especially felt frustrated when professors gave us passages to read and analyze in the classroom. Seeing native speakers of English classmates finish reading the same passage and discuss it with full comprehension gave me the impression that I am a slow reader and therefore felt frustrated.
- *Lack of motivation to read assigned books:* When it comes to predetermined or assigned books as opposed to books chosen out of interest, I usually didn't feel so enthusiastic and therefore took longer time to read. This corresponds with what Krashen called "free or voluntary reading". He argues that this

type of reading is the best thing an acquirer can do to bridge the gap from the beginning level to the truly advanced level of second language proficiency.

- *Subvocalization* (Saying the words to oneself while reading). I noticed this problem when I started learning my second language. This could be because we were taught initially to read orally in our L1 reading. We were required at the elementary level to repeat after the teacher and read passages aloud from the schoolbook. Some readers do not lose this early practice as they progress through grades. They continue throughout adulthood to move their lips while reading silently.

Possible Causes for those reading problems:

- *Lack of content schema* (prior background knowledge with the text being read). I always believe that there is a correlation between prior knowledge and reading comprehension and therefore found it easier to comprehend a text from Middle-eastern culture rather than that from Western origin. For example, reading about Eids (Muslim celebrations) is a lot easier than reading about Christmas, Valentine day, Thanks giving, or any other festivals from which I lack familiarity with. Similarly, reading about topics related to my major is not like reading on other areas.
- *Lack of formal schema or form schema* (prior knowledge of the structure). Arabic and English have different orthographic, alphabetic, and directionality systems. Unlike English, Arabic does not use Roman alphabet and is read from right to left. Arabic readers of English need more time than native speakers of English and more than Roman alphabet readers (e.g. Europeans) to familiarize their eyes and brains with the new symbols. These limitations on the eye-movements could slow down the reading speed and consequently affect the reading comprehension. In addition to these factors, there are other linguistic factors such as grammatical and phonological differences. In Arabic, for example, the word order is VSO while in English it is SVO. There is also a number of sounds (phonemes) in English that do not exist in Arabic. These differences could make Arabic readers of English slow in reading.