Reading Power: A Case Study

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Introduction

Beings usually learn to listen and speak before they learn to read and write. There is an important relationship between an oral language and its written form, for print depends upon the prior-existence of speech. Lado (1964:131) declares that reading and writing skills depend upon the establishment of associative relations between symbols and meaning. Thus, the relationship between language and thought is important to the development of reading skill, for reading is thinking. When students who speak other languages are reading in English, they may have some difficulty in using the foreign language as an effective association of thought. Hence, the reading process requires of the learners to develop habits, get motivated, and have practice and over- learning, so that their responses to written language may become as automatic as their responses to the spoken form of it.

Essentially, reading is a skill that cannot be learned overnight, but it requires continuously consistent intensive work on the part of the learners. Thonis (1970:211) declares, "reading materials should offer and promote good word recognition skills and comprehension abilities in reading English." Moreover, materials in reading programs largely show a variety in the vocabulary, language structures and concepts which the non-native speakers are expected to master. And good materials will present skills in an organized manner, be of interest to the students, provide for the necessary review and offer many valuable opportunities.

Briefly, the aim of this study is to help learners improve their reading   comprehension abilities. This improvement is not easy, but it

is very important and possible for learners of a foreign language to have such a task. In the light of this: Part I of this study introduces the definitions of reading. Part II discusses the pre-reading skills. Part III sheds the light on the power of reading, which includes (vocabulary building, extensive reading, selecting materials and the nature of reading). Part IV analyses the case of eight female students in the English Department (evening studies). They have been interviewed and asked about their attitudes towards reading skills in learning English as a foreign language. Finally, Part V presents conclusions and suggestions.

PART 1 : SOME DEFINITIONS OF READING

It is clear that every writer has something to say to his readers ; he is doing this to communicate ideas, beliefs, facts and interpretations so that the reader can see his point of view and accept his conclusions. To carry out his task, the writer works mainly with words. He selects his words and puts them together as effectively as possible so that the reader can find it easy to follow his thought. Raygon and Schich (1970:33) impose that reading comprehension involves awareness that two-way communications are necessary-from words (writer) to readers. It also involves the realization of what the writer expects his readers to comprehend. That is why he expresses his ideas clearly enough to understand his conclusion because readers have to follow his own thought to their ultimate ends. Moreover, they state that the better the writer understands what he is trying to state, the more effectively he can communicate with his readers.

Reading according to Hartmann and Stork (1976:192) is the skill of recognizing and understanding written language in the form of graphic signs and its transformation into meaningful speech. Hartmann and Stork add that there is a long tradition of too many approaches to the teaching of reading, e.g. the analytic method of drilling --- > phoneme ---- grapheme   correspondences (phonics), or the synthetic method of training the learner to associate the shapes of whole words with the ideas and actions they stand for.

Thonis's (1970:40) view of reading is that: " Reading is a visual system superimposed on auditory language ". So, to read is to grasp language patterns from their written representation. But, Lado (1970:131) considers learning a writing system differs basically from

learning to speak or understand a language. Learning to speak and understand means learning the language, whereas reading and writing imply that the language is known and that we are learning a graphic representation of it. Thus, it is possible to read a foreign language for limited purposes superimposing the native language sound system upon it. Actually, readers will put sounds into the sentences sub-vocally anyway. By imposing the native language sound system on the reading, many modifications of the foreign language will be provided. However, for full reading, this is inadequate since some modifications   which are not relevant will be made, and other modifications that are relevant will be leveled.

PART 2: PRE-READING

During the first few years of his classroom experience, the learner is expected to master the printed form of a language. Thonis (1970:37) states that learning to read has been described as a development task depending for its successful skill upon a number of variables in the pre-reading opportunities of the learner. Lado (1964:135) marks out that fit, which is the relation between a writing system and the spoken language it represents. When the learner can speak a pattern he/she can identify graphemes separately, it is time for him/her to associate the language with graphemes.

The graphemes in French are almost (for example), the same as that of English. So, teaching the graphemes is of minor importance and it may really be overlooked without major consequences. A brief presentation of the few symbols that differ from those of the native language writing will be helpful to the reader. Hence, in Arabic, whose alphabet shows no obvious similarity to the English one, all the letters have to be identified not only in isolation but in connected writing where the absence of short vowel marks, the location of long vowel marks above or below the consonants , and the direction of writing from right to left should be noted.

Teaching English to a reader of Arabic, or other languages with very different writing systems requires pre-reading instruction to identify the letters of the English alphabet. When the writing system is quite unfamiliar, symbols cannot be introduced as if they were completely different and unrelated. This increases the learning difficulty. Lado (1964:141) states that if a reader is aware of the

written system, of his/her eye movements or even of the sounds of what he/she reads, he /she is doing less than fully efficient reading. This awareness of the process or the means composes interference in communication (e.g. the interference of the native language and writing systems). This interference from the native language is overcome by letter mastery of the target language.

The habits involved in reading and writing the first language tend to be transferred to the foreign language with resulting interference where the two systems differ and with facilitation where they are comparable. However, literate Arabs read (L1) from right to left with the same ease that English read from left to right. The difference is bridged by habits formed through long practice. Lado (1964:138) emphasizes that up to this stage the reader has been mainly learning to read. Now the task moves to reading to learn. Or more carefully the reader here reads for information since his/her attention is on the information he/she can gather rather than on the graphemes or the fit.

To diagnose students' prior knowledge and provide necessary background knowledge so they will be prepared to understand what they will be reading. Abisamra (2007)

http://www,nadasisland.com/reading/

PART 3:   READING POWER

Reading, as a language skill   includes a number of minor skills such as identifying the graphic symbols (e.g. letters), associating the letters with meaning, structuring a sequence of words and then interpreting this sequence.

3.1 Vocabulary Building:

The vocabulary of the learners should be expanded(if the aim is to read effectively). Intensive and extensive types of reading are admittedly among the best ways to increase vocabulary power. Lado (1964:140) indicates that we do not achieve this, when teaching stops with simplified textbooks in the foreign language.

The speaker of another language begins to develop his/her reading vocabulary in English when he/she is able to recognize and to associate written forms of words with their oral counterparts , which he/she possesses. All of the learners of a foreign language know the

function words, whose role is mainly grammatical. And they know limited vocabularies, the engineer, the lawyer, and the like, have developed their own limited vocabularies. Each knows vocabularies that the others do not. Lado (1964:116) imposes that learners cannot choose the words in listening or reading. So, a small-sized vocabulary for listening and reading will be greater than one for speaking and writing.

A considerable literature is available on reading. Not sufficiently emphasized is the role of language in reading a foreign language. Moreover, reading films, and other devices are in use to speed up the learning of a foreign language as well as the native one . The materials should ideally be tailored to the learner's need at least in the intermediate stage between slow, word-for-word, reading for information and the more or the less efficient reading of a literate native speaker who concentrates fully on content whether or not he reads very fast (Lado, 1964:141).

Concentrated readings with a deliberate vocabulary overload might help. Some individuals read a dictionary to increase their vocabulary. Efficient
reading for information occurs when the written symbols move the language patterns in the reader , who then understands the type of total meaning. Lado (1964:140) concludes that speed modern education and society demand that we read a greater number of materials to keep informed .

3.2 Selecting materials:
All reading is reading for a purpose, as you realize. All reading requires some form of concentration, even reading for pleasure. Raygor and Schick (1970:49)   point out   that it is essential for readers to consider firstly their
Purpose behind reading a specific piece. The characteristics which the readers have in selecting appropriate materials are many and various. Thonis (1970:197) classifies them as follows: first, it is important to consider their age and their developmental maturity (any other information about their behaviour, and their experiences). Second, it is important to recognize that some selections would be more suitable for boys than for girls (the interests of readers, too, have an important bearing on the choice of materials).

Individual reading suggests that readers are capable of selecting their own reading materials; that they know their own needs and will keep in step with themselves accordingly; and that their interests in reading will be enhanced by the broader range of available books. Thonis (1970:59) suggests that the stories may cover many interesting themes not restricted by a control of vocabulary or language structures.

Subject matter becomes important at this stage. Tremendous nonsense has been perpetrated in this area as Lado (1964:138) indicates childern's stories are used for adults because the language is presumably simple; ridiculous stories that are an insult to the intelligence of children and adults keep appearing again and again; stories completely out of touch with the world of thought or experience of the target culture are read and become the mocker of a people.

Moreover, as the readers' report reading is in someway accomplished, many of the other skills of language :-writing-spelling-speaking - interpreting and critical reviewing- may be practiced.

3.3 The Nature of Reading:

When one learns to read English one learns to understand and interpret the English writing system. To be able to read better, the student should acquire four important skills;namely, eye-movement, recognition, association, and interpretation as announced by Kreidler (1973:177) .

Eye-movement means the ability to move the eyes from left to right along the lines. This skill is especially important and it needs a great deal of training for students who are used to reading Arabic texts which demand movement of the eyes from right to left .

As we read, Kreidler (1973:178) states that our eyes do not move steadily from one word to another; they really move in "jumps" which are followed by pauses. Often the eyes go back for a while when the reader is not sure of what he is reading. After a lot of practice the jumps of the eyes become bigger, the pauses shorter and the habit of going back gradually disappears .

<u>Recognition</u> means being able to distinguish one letter from another, one word from another , one mark from another as being the same or different. At the beginning, the reader hesitates and confuses words and letters. With repeated practice he can recognize such things easily and automatically.

<u>Association</u> means the ability to connect letters or symbols on the one hand and the sounds they stand for on the other hand . Al-Hamash (1977:70) says that since English writing does not always fit the sounds, this skill needs a lot of practice. Readers will find it difficult at the beginning to associate letters with sounds. With repeated practice the difficulties disappear as the readers master the spelling patterns. In advanced training, readers can correctly read words that they have not seen before , depending upon the spelling patterns they have mastered.

<u>Interpretation</u> means the ability to get meaning out of the symbols, words, or word-groups that one reads. It is true that interpretation depends upon association and recognition. In addition, it also depends upon knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. It is not enough, for example, to know that <u>book</u> and <u>books</u> are different. To get meaning clearly one should know the dictionary meaning of <u>book</u> as well as the grammatical meaning of the plural suffix –<u>s</u>. Interpreting the word-group <u>Mary is clever</u> demands knowledge of the dictionary meaning of <u>Mary</u>, and <u>clever</u> as well as knowledge of the meaning of word order, etc.

It has been stated at the beginning of this section that learning to read means <u>learning to understand and interpret the English writing system.</u> We have so far discussed what we mean by <u>to understand and interpret</u>. We still need to discuss what we mean by the <u>English writing system </u>as declared by Al-Hamash (1977 :72)

In the early stage of reading for information, readers should move slowly. A page an hour is not very slow. This can be done through a single reading programme for everybody. Reading can be achieved through letting each learner read books, magazines and newspapers outside the class and having him give oral reports on them in class. This can be combined with writing practice by assigning for instance a composition based on the reading.

Just as speaking, style changes according to the situation, purpose, and persons involved, so reading varies according to subject, readers, and purposes. A light detective story is read quickly for the suspense. A newspaper may be scanned selectively for news of interest…etc. A dictionary is consulted for specific items from Lado's view (1964:140). A poem can be read over and over thoughtfully, taking the sound, the thought, and the feelings into consideration. This diversification of reading is necessary for the native speaker as well as the foreign one. Learning to read quickly for specific facts and to read critically are discussed in various works .

Cultural reading to provide information and understanding of the target culture are recommended for mature readers. Professional and technical material is permitted for mature learners too, to study the language as a tool in their professional training. So, the extensive reading can be of much help, and can be very flexible. Each reader can read an entirely different list of titles on different scientific or/and literary subjects.

PART 4 :
4.1 The Case Study:
In this study eight female adults learners of English as a foreign language in the College of Arts (evening studies) University of Basrah are described. All are good readers in their first language, yet they have not considered reading as a means of developing their foreign language ability. All of the foreign language learners are native speakers of Arabic. They are interviewed . The interview is conducted in Arabic and afterwards translated into English for analysis.

Mrs. A., age (36), is a good reader of Arabic. She reads at least three books per month. She does not read in English (except her prescribed material) Mrs. A has been learning English for (12) years (2 / Primary, 6 / Secondary, 2 / Institute- she graduated from Medical Institute , 2 / College of Arts).

Mrs B., age (30), has studied English for (10) years (2 / Primary, 6 / Secondary, 2 / Institute- she graduated from Technical Institute , 2 / College of Arts). She reads the Koran everyday, belongs

to a literature circle and borrows Arabic books from the library. Mrs. B. has resisted English because she feels she is forced to join the department of English.

Mrs. C., age (37), has studied English for (10) years (2 / Primary, 6 / Secondary, 2 / Institute- she graduated from Technical Institute , 2 / College of Arts). She has recently become more interested in improving her English since her daughter is in the fifth stage (Primary School). She feels frustrated when she finds herself obliged to help her daughter with her homework. She usually reads Arabic newspapers and buys an Arabic monthly magazine. She blames her shyness for reluctance to interact with the instructors of English though she feels such an interaction is the most effective way of learning English.

Mrs.D., age (34), has studied English for (10) years(2 / Primary, 6 / Secondary, 2 / College of Arts). She. She has enrolled in a continuing education class to improve her English. Mrs. D. likes to speak and use English fluently very much since her childhood in order to understand the English programmes and films better. She took private courses when she was at Secondary level. At present Mrs . D., is taking a computer course.

Mrs. E., age (31), has studied English for (14) years (2/ kindergarten , 2 / Primary, 3 / Intermediate, 5 / Institute- she graduated from Teachers Training Institute , 2 / College of Arts). She, joined the Department of English for the last two years with her sister. She reads Arabic newspapers everyday and translates simplified English stories into Arabic to tell them to her daughter Mrs. E. is very eager to learn English and is frustrated with her slow progress. Mrs. E. rents video CD's from shops and she takes advantage of every opportunity to speak English. She has Diploma from the Teacher Training Institute, and is interested in pursuing a graduate degree from the Department of English.

Mrs. F, age (36) has been studying English for 16 years (2/ kindergarten , 6 /Private Primary, 6 / Secondary , 2 / College of Arts). the last two of which have been spent in the Department of English. She likes to learn foreign languages especially English. She claims that she is a regular reader of the Holy Qur'an and she is good

at Arabic grammar. At the same time she reads English grammar books with more interest than other prescribed materials. Anyhow, she likes to learn through reading but she has no time for enough extensive reading in English.

Mrs. G, age (31). She studied English for 10 years. eight successive years at first. (2/ Primary, and 6/ Secondary). Then she stopped doing that for other twelve years for personal reasons. Right now she is about to finish her second year at the Department of English successfully. Though she is keen on reading Arabic texts, she refuses to have any extensive reading in English claiming that she may get confused and have answers that are not satisfactory for her instructors who are fond of what they dictate to their students.

Mrs. H, age (33). This lady has studied English for 10 years (2 / Primary, 6 / Secondary , 2 / College of Arts) She used to get high marks at English depending on mere memorization. She is interested in reading all that concerns the women of her country. She is an active member of the General Federation of Women in Iraq. Anyhow, she does not like reading any subsidiary written material in English. She thinks that she has to master reading her textbooks and the notes she has already written in her classroom hours. She has been doing well for the last two years because of her ability to memorize the prescribed   materials. She claims that there is no time for her to spend on extensive reading.

All eight learners are highly literate in Arabic. Three of the eight (Mrs. C., Mrs. D., and Mrs. E.) are also very motivated to improve their English.

4.2 Ideal on Reading:

None of our eight readers had even considered reading as a means of improving her English. They were all   surprised when they were asked   what kind of English books they read outside the class. Mrs. A, for example, felt that reading interesting books in English was beyond her linguistic competence. She said she sometimes found books that sound interesting. She planned to go to the bookshop and buy a copy or more for her daughter since she did not think she would be able to read them herself.

The interviews revealed the cause. All the eight subjects under investigation had studied English as a foreign language in Iraqi schools, where the emphasis was on grammar rules and drills. This

emphasis, according to our ladies resulted in a lack of security in using English. Mrs. A, for example, blamed the emphasis on grammar for her reluctance to speak: she said, perhaps, we would have been better if we had not learned grammar at all. Then at least we would not be conscious of grammar all the time. So she had just kept quiet because she talked she knew she was going to make mistakes.

Mrs. C, expressed a similar opinion: she did not remember enjoining English classes that much. She always thought that her pronunciation was not good. She did not do badly on tests because they were written and mostly on grammar, which means she could memorize the rules. But, sometimes, when she helped her daughter with her homework she got confused. She continually asked herself, "Is this grammatically correct?"

The traditional approach extended Karshen (1997:127) argues that reading in EFL classes meant decoding every word. However, the only English books to which the eight women were expressed were textbooks, grammar books, and workbooks. When texts were included, the material was often boring and difficult; the eight learners reported that they never had the chance to enjoy a story. English education in Iraq convinced them that English books existed to be dissected and thoroughly analyzed; reading in English for them was a laborious, time consuming task.

Mrs. E, for example, believed that the sentences of English magazines that are published in Iraq (for example Iraq today) were so long. She saw that kind of English in textbooks all the time. Besides, the topics weren't interesting…

EFL teaching failed to inform them that reading could be beneficial for all aspects of foreign language competence. Mrs. C, spoke of the lack of access to any information about interesting reading:

During the ten years of English education in Iraqi schools "She did not have a single English teacher that recommend reading books other than the textbooks. The first thing that comes to her mind when anyone mentions an English book is the grammar book.

Mrs D, felt that reading would not contribute to her aural competence: Reading books and the ability to speak are two different things. Reading does not seem to help in developing oral skills. She does learn vocabulary from reading books sometimes. But when teachers use unfamiliar idioms or expressions or if they speak too fast,

she cannot understand". Krashen (1997:128) concludes that " EFL classes, in other words, did not consider recreational reading as an option, and ever created a phobia toward reading".

While Cho's approach in Cho and Krashen (1994:167) turned nonreaders of English into good readers by introducing light reading materials: novels from the Sweet Valley High series. IN addition, her students made excellent gains in vocabulary and reported improved listening comprehension and fluency. A similar frustration was attempted two of the learners in this study, Mrs. E, and Mrs. C. Both reported that the books were not interesting, although they were at appropriate level of English.

Mrs B. recommended that they try abbreviate simplified English books. Mrs. C., Mrs. E., and Miss. expressed interest and tried reading Shakespeare play's (Merchant of Venice) They reacted positively. Mrs.E. told me that she just read on. It was very interesting. She didn't care about words she couldn't understand. She could enjoy these kinds of books.

Mrs. B. then suggested that she went to a second hand bookstore or small bookshops to find simplified English books to read. None of them did so.

PART   5
5.1 Conclusions:

The reading requirement of the various subjects (science and literature) are particularly difficult for speakers of other languages who are expected to gain knowledge mainly through the medium of written English. Thonis (1970:110) states that he specialized vocabulary complexity of language structures, concept, loading and idiomatic expressions require highly developed word recognition and comprehension skills. He adds that non- native speakers of English face the difficult task of learning both the language and the content conveyed by language simultaneously. Frequently, students who lack aptitude are less able because of their inadequate and/or limited reading skills.

The subject of reading is worthwhile and interesting. Thus, Lado (1964:138) concludes that: (1) the subject should be adapted to the maturity of the learners. (2) the language should be graded for their level of proficiency. (3) serious literature is important at this stage only in so far as the language lies within the power of the

learners and the content   is worth thought or information. (4) serious literature should not be simplified in order to make it usable. (5) it should be postponed until the learners are ready for it as an experience in itself.

Among the topics of worthwhile content at this point are cultural patterns, customs, cities, heroes, and product of the countries where the language is spoken, these countries institutions, educational systems, great achievements, musicians, painters, leaders, newspapers, and magazines,   history, beliefs, and characteristics, topics of universal human value, such as discoveries and inventions…etc.

However, reading literature should be done when the learner is advanced enough in his/ her control of the language and his/ her understanding of the culture to experience it somewhat like the native reader. Lado (1969:142) indicates that this does not imply a fixed and specific level of control. Some literary works are easier to understand than others. Selection and arrangement of titles on the basis of difficulty for the learner should have the ability to recognise literature within the reach of the non-native learner.

Furthermore, it is better to prepare the learner to understand an experience given in the form of a particular piece of literature. Vocabulary and cultural items can be treated early so that when the literary work is read, it can be comprehended.

Under these conditions it is possible to introduce learners to foreign literature in a way so as to persevere the values of   an experience that is generally accepted as part of a liberal education in one's own language and so highly powerful in the foreign one.

5.2 Suggestions:

Foreign language learners vary, just as native speakers do, and they need to have access to a wide variety of reading materials. Krashen and Kim (1997:28) suggest three matters to provide.(1) access to a wider variety of books ,(2) easier access to books: Because light reading is so helpful to language development, access to light reading needs to be made easy. Easier access to books result in more reading Krashen (1993:53), (3) guidance: second language learners need to know what is available. They need to become familiar with different authors in order to choose what will be interesting to them.

Essentially, learners should know about the benefit of reading; most learners are simply not aware of how powerful reading can be in

improving foreign language competence. Learners need to overcome ineffective strategies they have developed in foreign language choices such as looking up every unfamiliar word. Most of these bad habits will disappear gradually as they read easier more interesting material, but some direct instructions may help.

The case for free reading is very powerful. In addition, free reading is much more pleasant than traditional instruction Mcquillan (1994:95-100). This is a shame that intermediate-level adult foreign language learners do not take advantage of it. Teachers and other educators can, thought, effectively address any lack of interest and lead their learners into language competence.

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