**Improving Student Reading in Arabic By Salah Ayari, Texas A&M University**

**Outline**

1. **The Importance of Reading**

Reading is critical for language development. Not only does it contribute to the growth of other language skills, but it also contributes to the improvement in other academic areas. As such, the teaching of reading in Arabic language programs needs to be done systematically and guided by research findings on reading development in general and Arabic reading in particular.

Many Arabic programs focus on developing their student fluency and decoding skills at the expense of reading comprehension, failing to realize that fluency and comprehension are both important and deficiency in one area leads to deficiency in the other.

1. **The Act of Reading in Arabic**

The act of reading in Arabic is more demanding than it is in other languages because of:

1. The mismatch between the spoken and written varieties of Arabic. This is especially true with heritage speakers of Arabic, whose knowledge of spoken Arabic could negatively impact their processing skills during the act of reading. Non-heritage Arabic language learners who are simultaneously learning spoken and written Arabic could also be confused by the distance between the two varieties.
2. The absence of short vowels in Arabic print materials presents a challenge particularly for readers of Arabic at the beginning level. The absence of short vowels could lead to ambiguity, which also could lead to inaccuracy in word recognition, which could in turn lead to comprehension breakdown. Teachers of Arabic are expected to help their students develop strategies to cope with the absence of short vowels by relying on the context and through eye regression for self-correction.
3. **Developing Reading Skills in Arabic**

Direct instruction is not enough to bolster children’s reading comprehension. It needs to be done through independent reading as well. In order to get the best out of student reading and motivate students to read, the selection and provision of children books need to follow certain criteria in terms of text format, language and content. The provision of carefully-selected children books in terms of language, content and genres could enhance reading comprehension, contribute to reading enjoyment, and put the reader on the road to continuous improvement in reading.

1. **Using Authentic Materials**

The use of authentic materials, as opposed to edited and teacher-developed materials, is important in order to prepare language learners to deal with reading materials they may encounter in their daily lives. The question is how to make such materials, which is normally designed for native speakers, accessible to Arabic language learners.

Language learners could be taught strategies to cope with authentic materials and maximize their comprehension. Thus, enabling learners to get the most out of what they read does not depend on the readability level of the text as much as it does on the task assigned to the learner. Therefore, being able to design age- and stage- appropriate tasks allows the reader to access authentic materials, thus bolstering their confidence and reading abilities.

1. **Evaluating Reading Comprehension?**

Providing clear prompts and instructions to measure the level of student comprehension is important to ensure reliability of the results. This is so because the language of instruction could play a critical role in whether or not the learner is able to complete the task asked of them. The types of questions, including true/false and multiple choice questions as well as open-ended questions, could also determine if and to what extent the reader is able to demonstrate his/her comprehension of the reading materials.