

ENHANCING ARABIC READING COMPREHENSION: LITERACY WORK

STATIONS APPROACH.

BY

LAMYA M. NAJEM

ABSTRACT

Thinking that Arabic is too difficult to learn, parents of some of my second grade Arabic class students give higher priority to reading fluency than reading comprehension. An action research was conducted where I divided the class into six literacy working stations; each addresses a certain learning skill. Students were conducting the lesson plan that I carefully prepared. Assessments of students listening comprehension, reading fluency and reading comprehension were administered at different times throughout this study. Students have shown a great improvement in these skills and in their behavior. My classroom management has improved and the method could be used for multi-level classrooms.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

My second grade classroom has a diverse group of students, where reading comprehension is not as desired. Literacy work stations are used in this research to serve all these students regardless of their diverse level of proficiency and style of learning. Specifically, the study addresses the following research question:

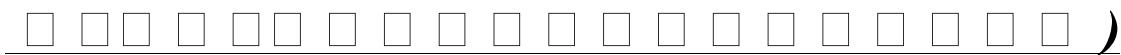
How would a diverse group of Arabic learners benefit from utilizing the Arabic literacy work stations in their classroom, in terms of improving their fluency and quality of Arabic reading comprehension?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Teaching Arabic as a foreign language is relatively a new area of research. In fact, there is even a lack of research in teaching and learning Arabic as a first language. Mamouri (2005) stated: “there is surprisingly little scientific research conducted on Arabic reading acquisition and even less of it in the Arabic region itself.” Published research on adopting literacy work stations to enhance Arabic reading comprehension simply does not exist. Accordingly, this literature review will touch on related topics that will help support this qualitative classroom research. These topics are: Arabic and short vowels, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Spoken Arabic (SA), Vocabulary and reading comprehension, Reading and anxiety, and Literacy work stations.

ARABIC AND SHORT VOWELS

Arabic has 28 characters, with its long vowels as characters. It also has short vowels that are not considered part of the 28 characters in the alphabet (Abu-Rabia 1998). Some of these short vowels are: Fatha, damma, Kasra, Sukoon, tanwin with fatha, tanwin with damma, tanwin with kasra, Shadda with fatha, Shadda with damma, Shadda with Kasra, Hamza, and madda (a Hamza with a long alif) (Alosh 2010). Keeping in mind that Arabic is read and written from right to left, these short vowels are written in Arabic as follows:



With each character of the 28, there is one, sometimes two, short vowels attached to it, in pronunciation for sure, but not necessarily in writing. Take this exercise for example:

(□)

(□)

These words correspond to: Kataba, kotob, koteba, Ketaab, kaateb, maktoob, maktaba.

The three letters k, t, and b appear in all of these words. These three letters are known as the *root* of these words. Knowing the root along with the method of derivation, the learner would be able to derive, or come up with, many words that are extracted from that root.

Examining the first three words in this family, and ignoring the short vowels for a moment, shows the shape or skeleton, of all three words would be identical:

(□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □)

But with the short vowels back into place:

(□)

Each word would give a different meaning; the first (from the right) is the past tense verb; He wrote. The second means books, the plural of book, while the third word would mean was written, the passive past tense.

Attaching these short vowels to these characters is done in the text of the *Qur'an* and the *Hadeeth*, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammed (Peace Be upon Him). We can also see these short vowels in the textbooks that teach Arabic to beginners, from preschool to 6th grade. Beyond 6th grade, in newspapers, official correspondence, textbooks, and in literatures, short vowels usually disappear from the written text though they continue to be an essential part of Arabic reading as well as Arabic reading

comprehension. The assumption is that the learner beyond the 6th grade should have mastered Arabic text to the extent that short vowels are no longer needed, and the reader could easily attach them to the characters, in his head, depending on the general context of the text. On rare occasions, though, a reader may still see those short vowels attached to the written text, if the meaning of the text becomes ambiguous without them.

Readers of all languages can fairly claim that in usual circumstances, they read in order to understand, but a not-so-skilled Arabic reader may very well find herself needing to understand in order to read! A reader of an Arabic text, without short vowels, would look carefully at the sentence, tries to make sense out of the context, and then utters or reads the sentence with the short vowels in place, in his mind not on paper. If he tries to read first, before making sense out of the context, he will most often fall in error.

Mastering Arabic at a young age and mastering it fully is the cure for this phenomenon. The other alternative is to keep using the short vowels in all written Arabic text (Abu-Rabia 1997), something that people in the Arab World do not feel the need for. However, such suggestion may become necessary for Arabic learners outside the Arab World. Short vowels are a significant facilitator of Arabic reading comprehension.

MODERN STANDARD ARABIC (MSA) AND SPOKEN ARABIC (SA)

In an Arabic-speaking society, there is a significant distance between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the many varieties of it that are being spoken in different parts of the Arab World. The spoken Arabic (SA), also called dialect, in Iraq for example, is to some degree different from the one spoken in Syria, Egypt, Morocco and other places. There is one MSA for all Arabs, but many dialectics. In general MSA is the written Arabic, as well as the language of newspapers, official correspondence and

also the religious language. Therefore, if they are not illiterate, Arabs from all corners of the world can read, write and communicate with MSA. However, they may have difficulty understanding one another to the full extent if each speaks in his or her own dialect (Ayari 1996; Maamouri 2005.) In a classroom setting here in the United States, MSA is the classroom learning language. Workbooks, DVDs and other resource material are mainly in MSA. The need to learn a specific dialect becomes important when learners intend to go to work in a specific region in the Arab World, mix with local Arabs and be exposed to their culture.

VOCABULARY AND READING COMPREHENSION

A child in the Arab World comes to start his schooling at an early age with about two to five thousand words already orally acquired from the society (Mamouri 2005). But, a child, who starts to learn Arabic as a foreign language, may not have any prior knowledge of Arabic vocabulary. It is dependent upon the teacher to create the atmosphere in which such a student builds his vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary is very essential in achieving reading comprehension (Joshi 2005; Salah 2008). The vocabulary threshold below which reading comprehension is not considered adequate is 95% in English and about 90% in Arabic (Salah 2008). This means that a reader of an Arabic text must know at least 90% of the words in the text before he can reasonably comprehend the text. The more words she knows, the better she comprehends the text and the more proficiently she may use the language. Knowing the words is one side of the story, using them in meaningful ways is another Joshi (2005.).

READING AND ANXIETY

One of the major obstacles to learning a foreign language is the anxiety the learner develops with that language. Horwitz et al. (1986) has associated foreign language anxiety to three related performance anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension is a type of shyness, or being shy to communicate with others even in the native language, and more obvious using a foreign language. Test anxiety usually results from the fear of failure. A foreign language classroom may have far more tests and quizzes than other subjects such as math and science. In order to progress in foreign language learning, the student ought to be subjected to a continuous testing, evaluation, and reassessing. If a learner has that natural fear of being tested, he would have difficulty coping with the more frequent evaluation in a foreign language classroom. This fear is usually associated with those students whose goal is perfection. Their high expectations of themselves are not realistic in a foreign language classroom. Making mistakes is only natural in such a setting. The third fear is of negative evaluation by the teacher, peers, and members of the society at large. The learner's fear here is not limited to test fear; going far beyond that by being sensitive to what others might say about him. Horwitz et al. (1986) added more elements to these three types of fears by conceiving that foreign language learning process comes with challenges to the learners that they do not face while learning other fields using their own native language. For example the self-proclaimed intelligent person in math, science and other academic subjects, may well face the reality that she simply needs to put extra effort into learning a foreign language before she can even come close to the level of confidence she feels while learning other subjects. This fact may have little to do with intelligence or genius in math; it simply takes different kinds of

efforts to acquire a new language. Without realizing such a natural fact, the learner may face this foreign language anxiety with the possibility of bearing its consequences or not. Many learners quit learning a foreign language altogether. The role of the teacher is crucial here. She has to explain to the learners this fact so as they will not lose their high self-confidence. The teacher must either help her class cope with the existing anxiety-provoking situation, or try to make the learning context less stressful (Horwitz et al. 1986). Some of the ways in which the teacher may accomplish this goal are working in small groups; playing games; journal writing; relaxation; and giving the learners a pre-test before the actual test are only few examples.

In the case of Arabic language, which is considered among the Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTL), learners' anxiety is even more apparent. From one side, the Arabic alphabet is different from Latin alphabet. The nature of Arabic cursive writing is another issue that may add to learners' anxiety. The Arabic culture, where Arabic is naturally understood, is different from the American culture, which in turn adds to learners' anxiety. On the average, an English native needs 1,320 hours of intensive Arabic program to be at the same level of proficiency for which it takes him 480 hours to learn French (AlKhafaifi 2005). Many Arabic learners give up after a year or two in the program. The gap between MSA and SA is also a factor in anxiety development. The fear that a learner may have is that, even if he is able to master MSA, he may not be able to adequately communicate with Arabs themselves. It is also a possibility that those who master an Arabic dialect have the fear that they may not be able to read an Arabic newspaper, or comprehend an official speech, radio or TV prod cast. These anxiety

sources are to be considered in addition to those discussed above which are not specific to the Arabic language.

LITERACY WORK STATIONS

The teacher often times finds herself so overwhelmed that she can not give the proper attention to each and every individual student. The curriculum has to move on; the behavior and other obstacles have to be addressed; and the teacher has to cope with the feeling that the class is not progressing as she would have liked. Students who are ahead of their peers in the class tend to finish their work earlier, and, if the teacher does not occupy them with something useful, they tend to be a source of disturbance to the rest of the class. It was a good idea for Diller (2003) to instruct those students to be engaged in some pre-arranged extra learning activities; such as folder games, work on a literature-related project, or reading with a partner. Those locations where extra activities were performed were called *centers*. Centers served as something supplementary or extra to the classroom period. It was like an incentive to kids who finished their work earlier, and also a motivation for other students to finish and then engage with the extra *fun* activities. Centers were later modified into work stations where all the students in the class might benefit from them, not only those who were ahead of their peers Diller (2003.) The name work station is used to reflect that what goes on in the station is no longer an extra activity; it is rather the curriculum itself with a different implementation. Work stations are not only for a few students, they are for all, with each student engaged in hands-on learning activities.

METHODS

My second grade Arabic class has a diverse group of students. Some students come from families whose native language is Arabic, while the parents of the rest of the class speak other languages, such as Urdu, English, and Bangla. Some parents love for their children to read Arabic and understand what they read, while others think that Arabic is too hard to learn, and it is sufficient for their children to recite the *Qur'an* whether they fully comprehend what they recite or not. My class is part of a private school in the Midwest of the United States of America, where English is the spoken language in the society and Arabic is used only during one hour, five days a week. My students are encouraged to use Arabic at least during that hour, but when they are outside the classroom, they either speak English, the native language their parents use, or a combination of both. Modern Standard Arabic, MSA, is used in the class, for both oral and written communication.

The idea of dividing the class into centers or literacy work stations was borrowed from teaching English as second language pedagogy. As the 2009-2010 school year started, I spent the first three months teaching my second grade Arabic as I had done before; addressing and engaging the whole class as one group. The focus of this research is to find out how effective is the use of Arabic literacy work stations on elementary students' Arabic fluency and reading comprehension. Accordingly, I designed and established the work stations in my classroom. My observations and assessments during the use of Arabic Literacy Work Stations are the reference points for my study. I established six stations; the listening, word work, reading, writing, conversation, and vocabulary work stations. In each station I have one or two students and each student stays no more than ten to fifteen minutes before he or she moves to the next station. At

each station, a student is required to do certain tasks, once finished he is free to be engaged with one of the play-to-learn activities available in that station. Being able to move from one station to the next while students are busy engaging the learning activities, gives me the confidence that these stations can in fact be used to manage a class with different levels of Arabic competency.

At this grade level, all learning activities in my class are designed to help the students improve their Arabic fluency and reading comprehension. Students were engaged with numerous activities, such as listening to authentic stories; reading to a partner; independent reading; read aloud; the magnet board; a Bingo game; a Scramble game; journal writing; word study games, and many more. Students' journal writing in class and at home is designed mainly to help their reading comprehension, though it also serves as the beginning of a more comprehensive writing program that should come in third grade.

An outside observer to my class might think that students are simply playing. They are in fact playing, but their play is directed toward an educational goal. Students are using Arabic language to make meaning in contexts that make sense to them. My goals for student learning were not only met, but with the atmosphere I am describing, I was able to manage the class much better than before, and the misbehavior incidents became minimum or even non-existent. The students' anxiety I used to observe on most of my students has completely disappeared. My students are now relaxed and at ease with Arabic, fully confident that they can comprehend and use it, and they can do so with fun. In fact the last two pretests I gave, students revealed that none of them needed to take the actual test, because every one scored more than 90% on the pretest.

My students became more responsible and independent in their attitude and learning styles. I invited them to participate in setting the rules of the classroom, and they were given the freedom to choose the Arabic language learning activity they liked after they finished the task on hand. The whole environment of the class has changed into a honey bee-like colony where every one is busy working on a task. The class has in fact transformed from almost a teacher-centered into a student-centered classroom. Instead of my direct teaching, with literacy work stations, my students are learning, and are learning independently. I feel now that I have more time to spare for those who need my help the most. All these positive attitudes, working habits, responsibilities, and independence have helped my students be more fluent in Arabic, and their reading comprehension has greatly accelerated.

RECOMMENDATION OF PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION

Most Islamic schools in the United States face either a shortage of well-trained Arabic teachers, or have multi-levels of Arabic competency among students in the same grade level. Some schools divide the whole school into Arabic levels, regardless of their grades and ages. Each level is taught by one Arabic teacher, an arrangement that enables the Arabic teacher to teach a uniform class, something every Arabic teacher prefers. However, this solution has three negative side effects: it imposes restrictions on the school schedule, as one need to schedule all Arabic classes at the same time which may not necessarily be possible all the time. The second side effect is the need for one teacher to teach one level, all at the same time, which may not be possible especially if we talk about the need for well-trained qualified Arabic teachers. The third side effect is the fact

that more than one age group in the same classroom would create anxiety especially for the older students. Older students tend to have fear of making mistakes in front of younger students, often preventing them from participating in the class conversation and activities. The results of this research show a solution for this problem: one skilled Arabic teacher would be able to teach more than one level in the same classroom.

REFERENCES

- Maamouri, M. (2005). *Arabic literacy*. Philadelphia, PA: The University of Pennsylvania.
- Abu-Rabia, S. (1998). Reading Arabic texts: Effects of text type, reader type and vowelization. *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 10, 105-119.
- Alosh, M. (2010). *Ahlan wa sahan: Functional modern standard Arabic for beginners 2nd Edition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Abu-Rabia, S. (1997). Reading in Arabic orthography: The effects of vowels and context on reading accuracy of poor and skilled native Arabic readers. *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 9, 65-78.
- Ayari, S. (1996). Diglossia and illiteracy in the Arab world. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 9(3), 243-253.
- Joshi, R. M. (2005). Vocabulary: A critical component of comprehension. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 21, 209-219.
- Salah, S. (2008). The relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension of authentic Arabic texts (Master of Arts abstract, Brigham Young University, 2008).
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(ii), 125-132. Retrieved from <http://www.jstore.org/stable/327317>
- Elkhafaifi, H. (2005). Listening comprehension and anxiety in the Arabic language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89(ii) 206-219. Retrieved from <http://www.jstore.org/stable/3588681>
- Diller, D. (2003). *Literacy work stations: Making centers work*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Lamyia Mukhlef Najem was born in Baghdad, Iraq on April 17, 1966, the daughter of Mukhlif Al-Ani and Amal Al-Hadeethi. After completing her work in Al-Karkh High School in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1984, she moved with her husband, Shakir Al-Ani, to the United States of America. She entered a correspondence college and earned her Bachelor

of Science degree in Islamic Studies and Islamic Law in December of 1997. In May of 2010 she graduated with a Master in Education from Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. She is currently teaching Arabic language to elementary age students in the Islamic School of Columbia-MO and to college age students in Moberly Area Community College.