

An Empirical Study of Reading Habits and Interests of Saudi University EFL Learners

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Received: February 1, 2015

Accepted: March 29, 2014

Published: April 25, 2015

doi:10.5296/ijl.v7i2.7034

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v7i2.7034>

Abstract

This small-scale, quantitative study investigated the reading habits and interests of Saudi English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students at a university-level preparatory year program (PYP). The study aimed to identify certain habits and preferences of EFL learners with regard to various personal practices of the reading process in first language (L1) as well as in second language (L2). The study utilized a custom-designed, 10-item questionnaire on a Likert scale format in order to gain more insights into the manners with which students may or may not approach reading. The participants were newly-registered, male and female students ($n=330$) on the university PYP course with mixed English Language proficiency. Analysis of the data collected using descriptive statistical tools indicated several issues relating to the reading habits in general, including students' lack of interest as well as lack of motivation towards 'academic reading' in both L1 and L2. However, the analysis revealed a greater level of engagement in reading in social media contexts. The study has several implications for future research and pedagogy in EFL reading as well as implications for the EFL classroom.

Keywords: Reading attitudes, English as a Foreign Language, second language acquisition, social media, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

One consequence of the current era of globalization and hyper-communication has been an explosion in the breadth and depth of public knowledge. This knowledge is easily accessible, both virtually through the internet and physically through various printed materials. However, the assumption that people read is to some degree, debatable.

1.1 Background of Reading in the Arab world.

In the Arab world, a stigma has been attached to it in the past few decades where the argument is made that people, especially students of all levels, do not read anymore (Al-Huwaider, 2002; Al-Subaei, 2004; Gamal, 2007; Jraissati, 2010; Bendriss & Golkowska, 2011; Hanna, 2011; Al-Yacoub, 2012; Kechichian, 2012, and that those who do read, do not necessarily follow a certain reading ritual or routine such as reading in libraries, parks or at cafes or even before bed time (Darwish, 2006). Although this myth has been recently challenged by various researchers (Kamhieh, Al Hameli et al. 2011; Rajakumar, 2014), a large number of teachers worldwide share the perception that students fail to read efficiently and/or adequately. Of the numerous explanations that have been established for the latter, a plausible one is that visual images are ousting language (Fairclough, 2001). This view is echoed by the postmodernists who view the ESL/EFL learners' reading attitudes and performance in English in relation to the current, contemporary 'post-linguistic' culture. Other, more commonly and widely cited explanations for the phenomenon include learner reading culture both at home and in school, L1 reading standards, testing backwash, learner motivation, pedagogical approaches, cultural schemata, and learner attitudes and interests (O'Sullivan, 2004). For Shannon (2003), it seems that a reading culture or reading habits are missing in many Arab societies, in which oral tradition is treasured and prized. Too frequently, however, research highlighting the negative consequences of these variables reaches only generalized conclusions and rarely attempts to provide positive and constructive recommendations.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

The current study aims to investigate the reading habits of Saudi EFL learners at the university level and whether the claim that "Arabs (or Arab students) don't read" holds any credibility. In particular, it seeks to determine the obstacles that such learners feel are hindering them from reading in L2 (English). The study attempted to the following questions:

1. Do Saudi EFL learners at the university level read for pleasure and if so, in what language of preference (L1 or L2)?
2. Is there a difference between the reading habits and preferences of male and female learners?
3. How much time do learners spend on social media daily?
4. What (if any) correlation exists between the amount of time spent daily on social media and learner's reading habits?

2. Literature Review

English has undoubtedly become the lingua franca of the world. Not only is English the language of globalization (Smala, Paz et al., 2012; Wadhwa, 2012; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014) but several linguists have acknowledged it to be the most widely spread international language worldwide (Tsui & Tollefson, 2006; Sun, 2014). It is estimated that nearly one third of the world's annual production of books is in the English language (Graddol 1997) and according to the Internet World Statistics (2013), English ranks first among languages used online.

As a foreign language, English has indeed acquired an eminent status in the Arab world. The most spoken language of business, technology and research (Fortanet-Gomez & Räsänen, 2008) as well as the driving force behind and vehicle for knowledge transfer (Welch & Welch, 2008), English is widely viewed as a commodity for global communication (Crystal, 2003), and its acquisition is perceived as compulsory. Furthermore, many Arab parents are keen on having an English education for their children, which they strongly believe is the prerequisite to professional and social success due to the fact that many well-paid jobs, higher positions and opportunities for promotion around the world (Block & Cameron, 2002), and particularly in the Gulf region, are associated with good proficiency in English (Troudi, 2009).

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), a job applicant who is proficient in English is more likely to obtain positions in private sector business or government than other applicants with poor or no command of English (Alfehaid, 2014). This is why many non-English speaking countries around the world, including Gulf countries, promote EFL proficiency as part of their effort towards the achievement of modernization and internationalization (Pennycook, 1994; Tollefson, 1995; Fussell, 2011; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012). Two studies conducted by Al-Ali in 2006 and 2008 reported that poor English proficiency levels are posing an obstacle to private sector workforce growth in the Emirates.

2.1 English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)

At higher education institutions around the world, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) dominates (Crystal, 2004). In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the adoption of EMI in all higher education institutions is mandated by the Ministry of Higher Education (Ebad, 2014). All students who graduate from Saudi secondary schools and who are admitted to universities must register in a preparatory year program (PYP) where they are expected to achieve a certain level of English proficiency before they are accepted into undergraduate degree programs. Because concerns regarding poor proficiency levels in English amongst the students is growing (Javid, Farooq & Gulzar, 2012), some universities in Saudi Arabia have been working to remedy the issue by continuously modifying and improving EFL pedagogical and instructional practices. Of the four main skills of EFL taught at tertiary level institutions in Saudi Arabia, reading and developing a habit of reading amongst the students, seems to be problematic and very challenging.

Few studies found evidence of poor reading comprehension amongst Saudi high school

students entering university (Al-Nujaidi 2003; Al Abik 2014). However, several studies which have been conducted in Saudi Arabia concluded that Saudi EFL learners have positive attitudes towards learning and acquiring English as well as reading EFL materials (Al-Arfaj, 1996; Al-Samani, 1999; Al-Akloby, 2001). Some studies have even showed that with the proper and positive pedagogical approach, Saudi EFL learners may become more motivated towards L2 reading (Al-Bassam, 1987; Alsamadani, 2008; Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman, 2011).

2.2. The Importance of Reading in English for EFL Learners

The emphasis on reading in general, and reading in L2 for EFL learners in particular, cannot be overstated. Reading is perceived as a sign of a literate and educated society (Roe, Smith et al., 2011) and is considered to be an important life skill to have for survival in our modern life, and thus, a foundational skill for academic success (Pugh, Pawan et al., 2000). In second language acquisition (SLA), many researchers believe reading to be the most important of the four main skills of English language learning (ELL) (Koch, 1974; Alderson, 1984; Carrell & Carrell, 1988). Moreover, reading is perceived as the most realistic communicative skill in an EFL context (Jeffries & Mikulecky, 2009) and is viewed as an interaction between the reader and the texts (Anderson & Cheng, 1999; Ertem, 2010, Tomczak, 2014). On this point, Upton and Thompson (2001) assert that: “Reading in a second language (L2) is not a monolingual event; L2 readers have access to their first language (L1) as they read, and many use it as a strategy to help comprehend an L2 text” (p. 469).

One of the most important aspects of learning in general and reading in particular is motivation. According to a theory put forth by Wittrock (1989), in order to achieve successful learning outcomes, four elements must be present: generation, motivation, attention, and memory. If even one of these elements is missing, successful learning is unattainable. Moreover, Gasigitamrong (2003) argues that two major causes of low L2 reading motivation and L2 readers’ difficulty accessing the correct content schema are the lack of an appropriate schema and a lack of the specific cultural background knowledge necessary for comprehension. In foreign language (FL) learning, motivation plays a vital part and students who are highly motivated with high self-efficacy are considered to be active readers and high achievers (Guthrie, Cox et al., 2000). Additionally, if a learner is motivated, he/she will not hesitate on tackling long and difficult texts (Guthrie, Schafer et al., 2001) and this motivation will lead them to an increased amount of reading and high reading achievement (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997; Baker & Wigfield, 1999).

2.3 Reading Research in Saudi Arabia

Despite the fact that much research has been conducted on how to motivate reading among Saudi EFL learners (Alhaidari, 2006; Al-Homoud & Schmitt, 2009; Al-Musallam, 2009; Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman, 2011), the primary focus of these studies has been the opinions of the teachers and what they perceive as successful approaches to motivating their learners. The underpinning objective of this study is to reverse this pattern of inquiry by placing students in the center of the inquiry and considering their interests and habits in order to determine the various endeavors that may lead to increased motivation and engagement in L2

reading.

In essence, reading needs to be repackaged as a way to learn new things and as an entertaining activity, rather than a way to pass an exam, or to practice English skills, or merely to improve scholastically. Those who define themselves as non-readers should be encouraged to see that connecting with the written word in all its forms is part of what it is to be a reader.

3. The Study

Surveys and questionnaires are commonly utilized to examine attitudes, opinions and habits of a group of people relating to a particular issue (Rose, Spinks et al., 2014). Additionally, surveys are implemented as a systematic process of gathering data pertaining to a particular topic, in this case the reading habits and interests of Saudi EFL learners, by asking questions of individuals and generalizing the results to the particular groups represented by the respondents (Thayer-Har, Dykema, Elver, Schaeffer & Stevenson, 2010). In this study, a self-administered paper-based questionnaire was devised and distributed to randomly selected male and female Saudi EFL university students.

3.1 Participants

The respondents were 220 male and 110 female ($n=330$) Saudi EFL PYP university students registered at three different government universities in three different cities in Saudi Arabia. The students selected were of mixed L2 (English) proficiencies and belonged to different class cohorts.

3.2 Instrument

A self-administered, paper-based, ten-item questionnaire using a multi-point Likert scale (close-ended questions) was distributed to participants (Appendix 1). The utilization of self-administered questionnaires is recommended to reduce the tendency of respondents to give socially desirable answers (Bradburn, 1983) and to increase the number of candid responses (Turner, Lessler & Gffoerer, 1992). The questionnaire was anonymous and students were given ample time to complete it. When ready, they were asked to place the completed questionnaires in a solid, non-transparent ballot box located at the back of the room to eliminate any sense of obtrusiveness while filling in the questionnaire. Because students were randomly chosen, it was inevitable that some of those students would have low abilities in English; for this reason the questionnaire was also made available in the Arabic language. Students were free to choose the language of the questionnaire they completed, which put them at ease in answering the questions and also ensured maximum participation.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaires were distributed in hard copies to students in either English or Arabic, according to their preference. The purpose and objective of the research were made clear to the students before they started filling in the questionnaires. In addition, it was made clear to them that the questionnaire was unassessed, that their responses were anonymous and would have no impact on the mark they received on any quiz, exam or other assignment.

Questionnaires gathered from respondents at the three different universities were collated and data was entered manually into SPSS® 22. Data was subjected to a mixture of descriptive statistics and graphs as well as nonparametric inferential statistics. The students' responses for each item on the questionnaire were coded, stored in SPSS® 22.0 and eventually analyzed for reading habits and interests.

4. Results

Data analysis provided interesting insights into the reading habits of the respondents. Table 1 below illustrates the demographic information of the students relating to their gender and their courses.

Table 1. Respondent demographics

Gender	Course	PYP 101	PYP 102	Total
Male		150	70	220
Female		92	18	110

Asked if they had read a story or a book and completed it in Arabic, a total of 107 students (32 males and 75 females) responded with 'yes', 265 (184 males and 81 females) responded with 'no' and 7 responded (7 males) with 'cannot remember'. Asked if they had read a story or a book in English and completed it, a total of 20 students (12 males and 8 females) responded with 'yes', 304 students (202 males and 102 females) responded with 'no' and 6 students (6 males) responded with 'cannot remember'. When asked if they had bought a story or a book in the past three years or not, a total of 134 students (66 males and 68 females) responded with 'yes', 191 students (150 males and 41 females) responded with 'no' and 5 students (4 males and 1 female) responded with 'cannot remember'. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondent reading and purchasing habits.

	Male			Female		
	Yes	No	Cannot Remember	Yes	No	Cannot Remember
Read a story or a book and completed it in Arabic.	32	184	7	75	35	0
Read a story or a book and completed it in English.	12	202	6	8	102	0
Bought a story or a book in the past three years.	66	150	4	68	41	1

Students reported a variety of reasons why they either had not read a story or a book and completed it (in Arabic or English) or had not bought a story or a book in the past three years. These are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Reasons for reading and purchasing habits.

	Male	Female
No time to read	15	0
There aren't many books that have interesting stories that motivate me to read.	49	31
The prices of the books in bookstores in the Kingdom are very high. The books or stories sold nowadays have topics that do not appeal to me.	2	6
	132	41
Public libraries as well as universities' libraries do not have many interesting stories.	17	26
I do not know where my university library is located or the public library location in my city.	5	6

Seventy-four students (25 males and 49 females) responded that they intended to read a book or a story in Arabic, while 59 students (46 males and 13 females) responded that they did not, and 192 students (146 males and 46 females) responded with that they did not know. Ninety-six students (48 males and 38 females) reported that they intended to read a book or a story in English, 59 students (46 males and 13 females) did not intend to do so and 197 students (149 males and 48 females) responded with 'don't know' (Table 4.4). It is quite evident that the majority of the students (60%) reported a positive intention towards reading in the future (a story or a book). This is indeed an encouraging sign, indicating a generally positive attitude towards reading.

Table 4. Intention to read a story or a book in Arabic or English.

	Male			Female		
	Yes	No	Don't Know	Yes	No	Don't Know
Do you intend you intend to read a story or a book in Arabic?	149	46	25	49	13	48
Do you intend you intend to read a story or a book in English?	146	48	26	46	26	38

When the students were asked if they were aware of existence of a university library on campus, one half of them (90 males and 75 females) responded that they were, while the other half (130 males and 35 females) said they were not. When they were asked if they intended to visit the library in the near future, 90 students (30 males and 60 females) responded with 'yes', 115 students (90 males and 25 females) responded with 'no' and 125

students (100 males and 25 females) responded with ‘don’t know’ (Table 5).

Table 5. Awareness of the location of the university library and intention to visit it in future

	Male			Female		
	Yes	No	Don't Know	Yes	No	Don't Know
Are you aware of the existence of a university library within the campus?	90	130		75	35	
If the answer to the previous question is ‘yes’, do you intend to visit it soon?	30	90	100	60	25	25

Asked if they believed that reading in English helps to improve their proficiency level, the overwhelming majority of students ($n=314$, 207 males and 97 females) replied that they did, 8 students (5 males and 3 females) said they did not and 18 students (8 males and 10 females) responded with ‘don’t know’ (Table 6). As did their response when asked if they planned to read a story or a book in the future, these findings suggest that the majority of students hold a positive attitude towards reading.

Table 4.6. Belief that reading in English helps improve proficiency.

	Male			Female		
	Yes	No	Don't Know	Yes	No	Don't Know
Do you believe that reading in English helps you improve your proficiency level?	207	5	8	97	3	10

The last item on the questionnaire asked students how many hours on average they spent daily using mobile phone messengers or social network applications (e.g. WhatsApp, Viber, BB Messenger, Twitter, Facebook). Twelve students (3 males and 9 females) indicated that they spent less than an hour doing so each day. Ninety-seven students (68 males and 29 females) indicated that they spent 1-3 hours, 203 students (134 males and 69 females) indicated that they spent 3-6 hours daily and 18 students (15 males and 3 females) indicated that they spent more than 6 hours daily (Table 7).

Although the results indicate that the students are tech savvy and have excellent skills in adopting and utilizing new technologies, it was quite shocking to discover that nearly two thirds of them spent between 3 and 6 hours daily on their mobile phones using social network applications.

Table 7. The number of hours spent using mobile phone messengers or social network applications (WhatsApp, Viber, BB Messenger, Twitter or Facebook).

	Male				Female			
	Less than an hour	1-3 hours	3-6 hours	Over 6 hours	Less than an hour	1-3 hours	3-6 hours	Over 6 hours
On average, how many hours do you spend using your mobile phone messengers or social network applications (WhatsApp, Viber, BB Messenger, Twitter or Facebook)	3	68	134	15	9	29	69	3

5. Conclusion

The research questions posed by this study centered on the reading habits of Saudi EFL university learners. With regards to the first research question, “Do Saudi EFL university learners read for pleasure and if so, in what language of preference (Arabic, L1 or English, L2)?”, the data indicate that there is a low tendency to read a printed story or a textbook, especially in L2 (English). Concerning the second research question, “Is there a difference between the reading habits and preferences of male and female Saudi EFL university learners?”, although there are no major differences between the genders, the responses indicate that more female students than male students have read a book or a story in Arabic in the past, intended to buy a book or a story in the future, knew where the university library was and intended to visit it in the near future. All other items showed no or almost no difference in the responses given by male and female students. With regards to the third and fourth research questions, “How much time do students spend on social media daily?” and “What (if any) correlation exists between time spent daily on social media and the reading habits of the students?”, although the fact that a substantial majority of the students (67%) indicated that they spent a minimum of 3 hours every day on mobile phone social media applications, it is worth noting that texting involves both reading and writing. A pilot study initiated by Dr. Michael Wesch in 2007 which included 200 male and female students from Kansas State University, who actually surveyed themselves, estimated that a university student will read (on average) 2300 web pages and 1281 Facebook profiles but will only complete 49% of the reading assigned as part of their course requirements (Wesch, 2007). To generalize and label students as “non-readers” might be rash and redundant. A more appropriate term would be “low reading motivated” students since it is evident from the responses received that students are not motivated or interested in most printed publications nowadays. This is consistent with the conclusions of Day and Bamford (1998), who posit that

attitude and materials both influence motivation, which ultimately may influence the learner's decision to read in a second language (L2) or not. Furthermore the students' responses indicate a strong desire to read in the near future, given that they perceive reading in L2 (English) as improving their level in English. The perception that reading in L2 (English) is beneficial in English (L2) acquisition is most likely to yield positive results.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

It is hoped that this study will contribute to a growing compendium of literature aimed at developing a much deeper understanding of habits and attitudes towards reading in an EFL context, with the ultimate goal of enabling EFL learners to be more motivated to read in L2 (English) and thus, become more proficient in English. Furthermore, by expanding the study to include extensive reading research in an EFL context, correlations between improved reading skills and other L2 skills such as writing can be examined in order to consolidate our understanding of the interrelationship among the four language skills.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our institute, the English Language Institute (ELI), for granting permission to carry out this research, and Dr. Tariq Elyas, the Vice-Dean for Graduate Studies at the ELI, for his endless support and encouragement.

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Appendix

Appendix 1.

Survey of EFL University Learners' Reading Habits, Interests and Practices

* Please use blue or black pen *

- Gender:

Male Female

- Year/Program of Study:

PYP – 101 PYP 102 PYP Other

1. Have you ever read a story/book in **Arabic** language and completed it (NOT including curriculum books)?

Yes No Cannot remember

2. Have you ever read a story/book in **English** language and completed it (NOT including curriculum books)?

Yes No Cannot remember

3. Have you bought a story/book in the past three years (NOT including curriculum books)?

Yes No Cannot remember

4. If you have answered 'No' to all (or any) of the questions 1, 2, or 3, is it because

You do not have the time to read

There are not many books that have interesting stories that motivate me to read.

- The prices of the books in bookstores in the Kingdom are very high.
- The books or stories sold nowadays have topics that does not appeal to me.
- Public libraries as well as universities' libraries do not have many interesting stories.
- I do not know where my university library is located or the public library location in my city.

5. Do you intend to read a story or a book in Arabic (NOT including curriculum books) this semester or the next?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

6. Do you intend you intend to read a story or a book in English (NOT including curriculum books) this semester or the next?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

7. Are you aware of the existence of a university library within the campus?

- Yes
- No

8. If the answer to the previous question is 'yes', do you intend to visit it soon?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

9. Do you believe that reading in English helps you improve your proficiency level?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

10. On average, how many hours do you spend using your mobile phone messengers or social network applications (*whatsapp, viber, BB messenger, twitter, facebook*)?

- Less than an hour daily.
- Between 1 – 3 hours daily.
- Between 3 – 6 hours daily.
- More than 6 hours daily

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