



## Developing Arabic Language Reading Skills in Secondary Schools: Problems and Solutions

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines the significance of reading ability in the Arabic language since the revelation of the Qur'an. It attempts to correct the assumption that students in secondary school have mastered certain reading skills in Arabic which can help them without any formalized reading instruction, which ideally must have begun as early as the primary school stage. This assumption is probably a reason for the lack of interest in training reading instructors because any Arabic teacher is believed to be a reading expert. Reading is a continuous process, as a result, the reading problems, classified as: physical intellectual emotional, language home and education, require a gradual approach to their solution. The absence of trainers and training programmers in Arabic reading, no doubt, affects the three levels of comprehension skills in the students, namely literal, recognitional and inferential. It is hoped that this discussion will provide the teachers of the language opportunity to identify which of the reading problems highlighted here affects their students, and probably use the methods hereby suggested to solve them. It is concluded that poor reading gives rise to low scores in examinations.*

**Keywords:** Reading Skills, Arabic Language, Secondary Schools

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### Introduction

In Arabic studies, the ability to read well has from the beginning been explained as the most important weapon. The Qur'an the final authority on Arabic has its first revelation as a command from Allah to the prophet Muhammad to read (Qur'an 96:1-4). More importantly, one of the main causes of the compilation and establishment of the standard text of the Qur'an was the discrepancy observed in the readings of the operating Muslim forces in various sectors of the Islamic empire. The

issue was reported to caliph Abu Bakr (d. 634CE) who rose promptly to the occasion. The event was recorded by Muslim and non-Muslim historians and chroniclers al-Ṭabarī, d. 932 C.E in his *Tārīkh* and *al-Jāmi*, P.K. Hitti, (1974). The rapt attention often paid to the reading of the Qur'an and the evolution of the science of its recitation popularly known in Arabic studies as *Tajwīd* is a directive from the Almighty Allah Himself.

*La tu' arrik bihi lisa maka lit a jala bihi, inna alayna jam mahu wa qur anahu faidha qara*

*nahu fattabi, qur anahu thumma inna alayan bayamahu*

### Translation:

Move not thy tongue concerning the (Qur'an) to make haste there with it is for us to collect it and to promulgate it, follow thou its recital (as promulgated). Nay more, it is for us to explain it and make it clear, (Qur'an 75:16-19)

It is the realization of the significance of reading skills as an indispensable tool in the learning process that has made science compulsory at the school levels in Arab countries. This was also realized a few years ago by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) when it designed a new curriculum for Islamic studies at the JSS and SSS levels.

In addition, reading is given various terminologies in the Qur'an so that the structural aspect, as well as the difference in the meaning, is not misunderstood. For instance the word *تل* (in Q73: 4, 25: 32;) has the connotation of to read without haste, to do much reading about something to achieve the deeper meaning of the words and ideas. Another word *تلاوة* used about seventy times in various forms in the Qur'an had the meaning of to rehearse' (10: 16; 6: 1;2: 121) has the connotation of to read without haste, to do much reading about something to achieve the deeper meaning of the words and ideas. The abstract noun from the first word is *تربيل* (slow recitation), while that of the second word is *تلاوة* 'reading aloud' or 'public reading' (Hans Wehr, 1976).

Reading experts in the English language also believe that there is a difference between skimming and scanning in the science of reading (see Novell, and Pugh, 1982; Sani, *et al* 2017). When a student skim reads, he is looking for general information, but when he scans reads he tries to find out the appropriate section (specific ideas), to evaluate and distill from that section the information which are vital to his purpose.

(Grant, 1977 and Unoh, 1986). This paper is therefore an eye-opening effort for researchers into Arabic reading problems in secondary school. It drew freely from experience and previous research efforts on the subject.

### Problems and their Causes

The first and foremost problem in the school under investigation is the general lack of any background in reading instruction. It has been mentioned earlier in passing that reading *القراءة* has always been taken in Arabic studies as an assignment easily performed by any teacher in the language. This assumption inhibits the development of any standard reading instruction that could have helped early identification of the student's learning problems, e.g. retention of basic concepts, vocabulary, writing style, etc.

As observed in Roe, *et al* (1978) the problem of a distinction between general reading ability and the content area should be clearly established at the developmental stage (see Riedman and Rowls, 1990). If this has been accomplished, students fail to perform well in the expository or informative prose like the *Nizām al Ta'lim al Arabi fī Nijīriya* by Shaykh Adam Abdullah al Ilori (1975). Rather, they find it interesting to read folk stories like *al-Qiṣaṣ al-sha'biyyah* (Ogunbiyi, 1975). As long as each content area demands unique reading skills e.g. specialized vocabulary, conceptual lead, style writing etc, the learner's performance in examination will not be impressive without adequate attention to each of these components.

### General and Specific Disabilities

Since the factors of reading disabilities are usually classified as physical, intellectual, emotional language home and educational, this classification may be appropriate. The physical aspect is denied. Some Arabic language students with visual problems are for certain constraints unable to declare their weakness.

Some cannot obtain reading glasses because of their poor financial position, while some feel shy to use them, probably because of the social

derision often associated with using or wearing glasses. There is the funny belief only old people wear them.

Visual perception is a mental process in which the reader processes visual information in relation to location, memory, and intercessory relationships. The problem of fixation observed in some of these students is therefore a retarding factor. Efforts to achieve correct eye movement amount to improving reading skills, since when reading skills are improved the eye movement becomes efficient.

Auditory problems, i.e. difficulty in associating oral pronunciation with printed words are usually caused by damage to the middle ear, inner ear, or the ear drum. Since auditory perception affects learners' ability to master sound pitched at different levels and varying degrees of loudness, it is very relevant to this discussion.

Unless early efforts are made to solve these highlighted problems, foreign learners of the Arabic language may have difficulty in phonological exercises. For example, distinction between the pronunciation of ط and د, ط and س, ض and د, ط and د, ط and د etc. is not possible without a development of self-auditory discrimination exercises with a variety of available instruments, or active participation in a phonics Arabic language development at both the primary and secondary school levels.

### **Intellectual Problem**

Reading itself is a complex act because it requires reasoning abstract analysis, synthesis and various comprehension skills that are related to a higher level of mental ability. Lack of reading skills, particularly in students of the Arabic language, makes the task more formidable than already imagined. It out off an important aspect of their intellectual development and allows them to stand the risk of woeful performance in examinations.

Also associated with intellectual problems are the following:

- a. Negative attitude to reading as shown in learners' heavy dependence on classroom lecture notes.
- b. Repetition of words, reversal, word-by-word reading excessive vocalization, ignoring punctuation marks pointing at words like reading, poor book body position, and head movement, just to mention a few (Roe 1978). The fact that Arabic punctuation marks are not as distinct as in English makes the task much more difficult.

### **Skimming and Scanning**

The absence of formal programmers of reading instructions in Arabic studies in Nigeria, starting from the primary schools, is a problem carried over to the secondary school. Very unfortunately, there is even no provision for the teaching of Arabic at the elementary school. The ability to skim or scan read is not expected from a student who is coming in contact with a formalized reading assignment for the first in his academic life. This in turn affects the effective use of the library facilities at a time when Arabic textbooks are very expensive and very difficult to obtain. Placing a rare book on reserve in the library has no meaning, if learners cannot comprehend or pinpoint what exactly they are expected to digest in it.

Furthermore, most students of the Arabic language under treatment do without a home background, consequently, they perform poorly in examinations. One can imagine the performance of a learner who cannot distinguish between general and specific ideas or one who finds it difficult to read essay topics understandably. Famous researchers and reading experts such as Unah (1977), Fasunmon (1979), and Ayodele (1983) are of the same view that laziness on the part of students is responsible for their reading problems at the secondary school level.

In a research conducted by Ayodele (1983), a beautiful summary of the reasons for students' poor reading habits is given

1<sup>st</sup> students are lazy, and not prepared to read for interest.

2<sup>nd</sup> most students come from homes that have not formed a tradition of keeping books for reading pleasure.

3<sup>rd</sup> students have many subjects to learn, so they have no time for reading

4<sup>th</sup> schools do not encourage/force students to make use of (available) libraries.

5<sup>th</sup> the schools themselves are too poor to maintain (good) libraries

6<sup>th</sup> most students are scared by literary works since they do not understand the books.

### Readability Problem

By readability, we mean reading difficult, in the selected material for reading. Selections that are very difficult to read are said to have high readability those that are easy to read are said to have low readability levels.

With special reference to the Arabic language in Nigeria, this problem has two dimensions. In the first place, nearly all available textbooks in the language are written by foreign authors for native-speaker learners. Local needs and environments are never taken into consideration. The second dimension is that books written by Nigerian authors are very few and not easy to get. The country's poor economy has affected very adversely the cost of printing materials. Book writers could not afford to pay printers from their meager salary, while the publisher, too considered it a bad risk to publish books that are not likely to sell well. Up till now, not up to a thousand candidates have registered early for Arabic at the West African school certificate examination/General Certificate of Education (WAS/GCE) level. The new examination body - the National Examination Council (NECO) - has not made any serious impact on students' interest in Arabic.

Researchers in reading and readability problems, Yoloje (1975), Etim and Unoh (1983), Omojuwa

(1984), Ikegulu (1989), Oderinde (1978), Abdul (1981) Abubakre (1984), Balogun (1985), and Oladosu (1987) have spoken extensively on instructional problems facing Arabic language teaching in our schools. It is only when books are available in abundance that the question of which one is appropriate to what level can be asked. In a situation where schools are operating the systems of *beggars are not choosers*, learners' readability problems can at best be kept in view.

### The Problem of Reading Aloud

Except for those of them who had gone through the Muslim traditional Qur'anic school system, Arabic students in secondary school often perform poorly when asked to read aloud. The reason is that earlier exposure to parrot-like reading of the simple and later longer chapters of the Qur'an was not there. Whereas in West Africa generally, exposure to Arabic reading often with the Qur'an nervous behavior which often borders on fright and lack of confidence is usually removed by early exposure to reading in the traditional school mentioned above. This problem often gives rise to learners' poor self-concept.

Reading aloud, particularly in Arabic, reduces learners' phonic and phonetic problems phonetics is the science of speech sounds in actual use, while phonics is the application of phonetics in the teaching of reading and spelling (Anderson, Lap Diane, 1979). Experts in Arabic reading science always advise that any learner of the Arabic language outside the native speaker's environment must try to make up for his deficiency by reading aloud at least at the rate of one hour a day.

### Suggested Solutions

Reading is an important goal of the language programmer, learning to read is a continuous process. Given this fact, the following are suggested as methods of developing viable Arabic reading instruction in secondary schools.

- (a) The four interrelated stages of reading programmer be established as early as the elementary school levels, i.e. developmental, remedial, content and recreational stages.

This is necessary because there is no time at which learning can be declared "finished" with vocabulary. As long as students and teachers continue to learn new concepts they must come across new words. Motivation for learning new words and their meaning must be encouraged.

- (b) That any observed reading disability, whether physical, intellectual, home or otherwise must be arrested. Auditory problems must also be given proper attention.
- (c) That graduality be observed in achieving improvement in the reading skills since no significant improvement in the reading course can occur overnight. Fry (1977) recommends a directed ten-week course in class.
- (d) The government and schools should jointly work on organizing a developmental reading programme and promote the continuous growth of students' reading power. Consideration must also be individualized instruction and continuous evaluation devices. Training of reading experts and instructors should be considered as very crucial.
- (e) That readability problem, as seen today in the Arabic language, is a product of many factors. If suggestions under a-d above are implemented, motivation with reality and success will be achieved. Flexibility and personal choices of the earlier reading materials must be given adequate consideration. As observed by Fanecechiraro (1969), reading is a complex process requiring the knowledge of several separate skills. Each reading skill will have to be developed psychologically as a solution to the Arabic readability problem.
- (f) That the problem of laziness noticed in the students affects the result of follow-up reading assignments. Building up vocabulary reservoirs during reading exercises helps learners to do well in the reading task if most of the words are known.

Students with limited vocabulary can never read very well. The students under discussion should be encouraged to develop the ability to read with differing strategies according to reading purpose. The manner of reading Arabic prose is different from that of poetry. Similarly, pan-Arabic materials and that of business Arabic have different vocabulary structures and approaches.

### Conclusion

The ability to read well contributes to self-realization and increases the personal social adjustment of students. Students learn to read over a long time, and after mastering various reading skills, the learner must continue to refine them. In academics, no matter how old a person is, he or she must continue to improve his or her reading skills. There is the need for programmed reading instruction in Arabic languages which begins at the early stage of the school system. Governments' involvement is indispensable to achieve success for the programmer. In addition, training workshops must be conducted for reading instruction teachers. Through this method, the disparity in the reading ability of students can be minimized. A large number of Arabic students in our secondary schools read below the expected level. If a reading programme is developed, the skill of the few students who read below their level placement can be motivated by diagnosing the readability of instructional materials and their skills.

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