Toward a Culture of Reading: Four Perspectives

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This article discusses four paths toward the development of a culture of reading, from the perspectives of a teacher educator, a librarian, an educational technologist, and a curriculum developer. Together, these individuals explore common problems and solutions in moving Arab students toward a reading culture. Particular reference is given to the United Arab Emirates and the authors' host institution, The Higher Colleges of Technology.

The fostering of a reading culture among students as a pleasurable and useful activity is a challenge in both the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Arab world in general. Part of the problem proceeds from a common belief that Arabs share an oral, rather than a written culture (see, Alrabaa, 2008; Sowayan, 2003). Denny (1989) places an oral culture within the context of Qur'ānic study:

> Orality and literacy have coexisted throughout Islamic history, but the orality of Muslims is not quite the same as the orality of primary oral societies never influenced by writing and texts. Muslim orality is, to a remarkable degree, liturgical, residing in the conviction that authentic life is made possible only in relation to sacred words. Muslim orality is also a discipline of memory: not a creative process, but a conserving and transmitting process. (Denny, 1989, p.13)

What Denny did not explain was whether a young Muslim's principal exposure to reading through the Qur'ān is likely to define his or her attitudes toward reading. Some may argue that it does, and to a negative degree, but this would ignore a long history of great among the Arab peoples that, only in recent years has diminished; a common indictment of Arab literary efforts is the UNESCO report that noted that more books were translated into Spanish in 2002 than were translated into Arabic in the past 1,000 years. Recent measures of Arab readership, literacy, and literary output in the same report are similarly discouraging, partly because of what Isomura (2004) sees as the impact of a basic cultural ignorance that result from a lack of love of learning:

> The notion of "cultural literacy" refers to the need for cultural awareness, both of one's own culture and of other cultures. Surveys concerning the general knowledge of today's high-school students have revealed disturbing levels of cultural ignorance in fields

ranging from geography to music and literature. It is necessary to educate for the development of cultural literacy: it is not only necessary to teach students to read and write; it is also necessary to transmit cultural values and understanding." Isomura, 2004, p. 67)

This article examines four paths toward the development of a culture of reading, from the perspectives of a teacher educator, a librarian, an educational technologist, and a curriculum developer. The exploration of common problems and solutions helps point the directions in moving Arab students toward a reading culture.

A Teacher Educator's Perspective

There is an urgent need to invest in reading initiatives in the Arab world. Outdated curricula and methodologies, reliance on rote learning, and too few qualified teachers pose a threat to the establishment of a reading culture in the region. In response to a demand by government authorities to significantly improve educational practices in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and simultaneously Emiratize and professionalize the teaching profession (Mograby, 1999; UAE Ministry of Education and Youth, 2000; Clarke & Otaky, 2006), the development of Vision 2030, a plan to reform education in the UAE by encouraging effective teaching methods was developed. Within this recognition of the need for reform in UAE schools and classrooms, one issue of concern to educators and teacher educators is the need for a reading culture. However, as many Emirati government school classrooms still echo with teachers shouting and instilling fear, promoting accuracy of choral reading to the detriment of developing a love of reading, Emirati students read little beyond their schoolbooks and prefer to watch television (Taha-Thomure, 2003).

Transformational Teacher Education pedagogy in promoting a reading culture in primary school classrooms

A recent initiative for change in the promotion of a reading culture in primary schools involved the shaping and contextualizing of a teacher education reading methodology course (EDUC 250) at the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program. Curricular and pedagogic changes were made to address the question "What do student teachers need to know about reading to teach it effectively in the context of language learning in UAE schools?" Moving from understanding reading as a multifaceted, complex phenomenon to practical application of concepts and methodologies, the increased capacity of trainee Emirati teachers to teach reading successfully was seen as a catalyst for addressing negative attitudes towards reading in Emirati schools.

Within this, the potential influence of teacher education on developing reading teaching styles was explored, particularly explicit performance modeling of reading approaches and implicit modeling of positive attitudes towards reading. Based on course evaluations, teaching practice reports and observations, modeled constructivist reading lessons in college were found to be a major influence on shaping what students did in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and the reading culture they promoted. Using statistical software NUDIST* inductive coding, effective elements noted by student teachers in focus group discussions, included:

- Shared Reading
- Reader's Theatre
- Electronic books
- Storysacks
- Vodcasts/Videos
- Reading Aloud
- Modeling of Pre-, while- and post- reading stages
- Questioning techniques
- Total Physical Response (TPR) activities
- Modeling of Puppets and Props
- Using intonation, rhythm and pitch while reading
- Role play
- Drop Everything and Read (D.E.A.R.)
- Library week events, including guest authors, reading workshops, panel discussions, and school visits
- Use of resources: musical instruments; Post-it Notes; PowerPoint presentations

Teaching Practice reports revealed that many of these modeled interactive strategies were trialed by student teachers during their teaching practice placements, demonstrating that many student teachers taught as they had been taught to teach. For example, student teachers on Teaching Practice Placements reported that the lively and attractive features of Storysacks further engaged EFL learners in the storylines and sustained their interest for longer periods of time:

My students were so interested in the storysacks of *The Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, that when the lesson ended, they asked if I could read it again with them (Focus Group interviews, 2007, p. 1)

Significantly, the Emirati student teachers highlighted the powerful influence of modeling positive beliefs and attitudes towards reading and motivating EFL students to read for pleasure, as modeled by their own teacher educator.

We've taken all the approaches… that can or cannot be implemented in Emirati classrooms …. Now we know which is good and what is not good for young EFL learners... Also our view of reading teaching is different from our teachers. I mean they thought only about comprehension, pronunciation and grammar. We want students to develop a love of reading and not be afraid to make mistakes. (Focus Group Discussion, Group 1: 2007, p. 1)

Student teachers further expressed a desire to become agents of change, by setting themselves apart from their former teachers, moving to more child-centered approaches, instilling a love of reading among EFL children and creating a positive reading culture:

From our past experiences, some reading techniques in EFL classrooms were not really promoting the love of reading, so now as future teachers we really want to promote the love of reading so that students will have the desire to read for pleasure in a reading

friendly environment ... we know what we have to do to improve this situation. (ibid, p. 6)

Connections were also made between modeled reading strategies observed in the college classroom with examples of best practice modeled in Private English Schools.

The evidence from student teacher responses indicates that effective teacher education pedagogy, particularly performance modeling of reading approaches and behaviors can indeed influence styles of reading teaching and better prepare student teachers with the skills and strategies necessary to teach reading in UAE classrooms.

Future Initiatives

While the student teachers view themselves as agents of change within a traditional system of primary school education, referring to what Smith (2000, p. 12) terms "the folklore about student teachers 'changing' the schools", whether or not they will actually effect change in the teaching of reading will need further research. However, an initial follow-up study on the impact of the HCT B.Ed. program in schools conducted by Clarke, Hamston and Love (2007) found graduate teachers having a positive influence on their school communities and initiating change in the form of professional development for colleagues in the role of storytelling, integrating English with other subjects, and establishing processes for sharing curriculum materials.

Research literature indicates that the provision of systematic support for new teachers can increase the effectiveness of their performance in schools (Boreen, Johnson, Niday and Potts, 2000; Wong and Breaux, 2003), and that it is possible for beginning teachers to become change agents when they are supported by communities of teacher learners (Corrie, 2000). This means an extension of this research could involve assistance with professional development reading workshops, the establishment of links between the college classroom and graduate classrooms through involvement in special events in schools (e.g., book week) and the provision of access to a wealth of reading resources. Exploring ways in which Emirati student teachers and graduates learn to teach reading is a long-term job. Teacher education programs are the first step in a professional journey that requires the nourishing conditions to support the promotion of a reading culture through teacher development. It is, nevertheless, a journey that will never end because, no matter how effective we are as teacher educators, we can always improve.

A Librarian's Perspective

"Reading is boring."
"It is too difficult, it takes too long."
"Reading is what I do for College work not what I do for fun ... reading is hard work."
"I don't read; I don't like it."

These statements, made by Diploma Year One students at HCT, represent the challenges faced by librarians both in the UAE and around the world when trying to encourage reading. School librarians encourage reading for pleasure because they understand the correlation between improvements in reading and improvements in writing, grammar, and vocabulary (Krashen 2004,

as cited in Snowball, 2005). Academic librarians encourage reading to improve understanding of a range of issues and to develop the ability to argue a point and construct an academic argument. For librarians in the HCT cultural context of a women's campus, reading is even more important because it provides a wealth of experience on both an emotional and intellectual level, sometimes outside the confines of the traditional Emirati female experience.

For second language learners, extensive reading improves the ability to critically evaluate texts and helps to develop research skills. For these students, reading helps to provide experience in texts, the majority of which are written in English, where typically these second language learners are linguistically disadvantaged, especially when vague, sarcastic, or loaded terms are used (Stapleton, 2005). Therefore it is imperative that Emirati students develop reading skills to be able to engage in the written word so that they can make sense of the complex and rapidly evolving social, political and economic environment of the Middle East.

One of the greatest challenges facing librarians in the task of developing a reading culture in the UAE is the lack of exposure to books and little access to libraries. Public and school library systems are still in development and there is little exposure to books and reading or literacy programs spearheaded by a national public library system. Many Emirati students have never visited a library other than a school library, and many come from schools that featured small and often inadequate collections. An academic college library is often the first library experience for most of these students. Therefore librarians in academic settings need to redefine their ideas about spaces, activities, collections and readers to ensure they are providing a positive atmosphere for a reading culture to develop.

Defining HCT readers

To help provide the kind of libraries, services and collections UAE students need to develop a reading culture, it is important to understand stakeholder groups and, more importantly, how stakeholder groups define themselves. During Library Week, April 2008, the library in collaboration with the Education Department at Abu Dhabi Women's College (ADWC) conducted focus groups with Diploma Year One students. The focus group participants were asked if they read, why or why not, and how they could encourage reading among their families and peers. Ninety-nine per cent of Diploma students defined themselves as non-readers. However after further questioning it was found that those who defined themselves as 'non-readers' read print and online materials (magazines, web sites, social networking sites) that they believed were not sanctioned as authentic reading material by teachers or librarians. Therefore non-readers need to be redefined as 'reluctant readers' who do read, but who do not possess the desire or motivation to read particular types of texts. These findings match those of the United Kingdom (UK) National Literacy Trust questionnaire, which surveyed 1,600 UK students in 2007 (Gorman, 2008). Both this survey and the focus group results revealed that the image of a reader and the types of materials that constitute reading creates barriers for students. As Gorman (2008) suggests, the definition of "… what reading means needs an extreme makeover" (p. 21).

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 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. From a librarian's perspective in the UAE, we need to redefine academic libraries in the UAE so that scholastic endeavors can sometimes be defined as the byproducts of the joy of reading. We need to create a culture where reading is making meaning out of any text, whether it exists in print or online, in a library or in a mall, still or moving, surrounded by imagery or sound, and where people can read for no other reason than enjoyment.

All Reading is Good Reading

In a culture where students have not grown up with the concept of a local public library system, bright and welcoming school or college libraries, or even a variety of bookshops, a library is often seen as an intimidating building with blocks of academic books. In a November 2008 HCT Library survey, conducted with Diploma Foundations English students, one student described her school library as, "… a classroom with a few old books, and one computer we had to book. When it was my turn I had already finished my project so I didn't need to go there." In the absence of widely accessible libraries in the UAE, it is important that college libraries do not assume their role is that of a research institution. These libraries must consider a dual role when considering services and collections, not only to cater for academic endeavors, but to also encourage those reluctant readers to see entering the world of books as part of their leisure activities.

Krashen (1993) discusses the importance of popular fiction for young readers: "Perhaps the most powerful way of encouraging children to read is by exposing them to light reading, a kind of reading that schools pretend does not exist … I suspect that light reading is the way that nearly all of us learned to read" (as cited in Crawford, 2004, pp. 47-48). Crawford suggests that comics are an "… invaluable tool for motivating reluctant readers" (Crawford, 2004, p. 47). Gorman (2008) also contends that the cover art of graphic novels and popular fiction pulls in those who would otherwise not engage in books. At the ADWC library, graphic novels have proved to be a popular hook into reading because the illustrations provide valuable contextual clues to the meaning of the written narrative and are not viewed as traditional graded readers or seen as school work.

Librarians catering to reluctant readers also need to look beyond what would be traditionally called leisure reading. Often students see fiction, particularly graded readers, as assigned reading, which equals assigned work. Often students are requested to produce reading portfolios of graded readers, even if these readers are of no interest to them. This can defeat the purpose of encouraging students to read for pleasure. Academic and school libraries need to build collections that include non-fiction material of all types–from books about music, jewelry, weddings, or movie stars–anything that is going to be the interest areas and true escape paths that entice reluctant readers. For second language learners, non-fiction usually comes in digestible chunks, is non-linear, and is media rich. It is ideal for readers who find completing a whole book intimidating as non-fiction can often be read in sections or chapters without loss of meaning.

Collections should not only look at type, but also range of content, within the confines of cultural norms and social responsibility. We need to look beyond the traditional forms of literature at emerging trends to cater for Arab youth interests. For example, studies in western libraries have

shown that a new type of literature, urban literature, attracts reluctant readers who have grown up with Music Television (MTV) and the rise of hip hop culture (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, and Cottman, 2006; Meloni, 2007). Urban literature, which addresses the street culture glamorized in hip hop music videos, has special appeal with young Arab males aged between 14 and 25, a large audience that rarely reads for pleasure. Urban literature provides another hook into books by creating opportunities for reading a totally new and non-curriculum based literature.

The Library as Flexible Social Spaces

Although leisure reading has reportedly declined in most western countries, mega-bookstores like *Borders* and *Barnes & Noble* flourish because they heavily invest in services, resources and facilities that promote leisure reading. "Significantly, mega-bookstores don't just sell books and multimedia products; they teach people new ways to read and interact with printed material" (Trager, 2005). Mega-bookstores succeed as contemporary sponsors of literacy where traditional libraries fail because they do not restrict readers in how or what they read, and do not prescribe to the theory that reading must be a serious activity. In the UAE cultural context, Emirati readers have not been brought up under the strict regime of traditional library spaces, and therefore are more likely to feel comfortable in a contemporary space. Mega-bookstores "… promote a sensual, social reading experience because they are keenly aware that virtually all unplanned purchases—and many planned ones too—come as result of the shopper seeing, touching, smelling or tasting something that promises pleasure, if not total fulfillment" (Underhill, 1999, as cited in Trager, 2005).

As is the case with mega-bookstores, libraries must entice readers using all the senses. Some libraries have embraced the idea of libraries as social spaces by providing cafés, casual seating and flexible spaces for group gatherings. If reading is seen as a social experience, it will become an interlinked natural ritual (Brown, 1980, as cited in Trager, 2005). Flexibility is the key to good library design in the UAE. Libraries' dual role as places of research as well as places to discover and encourage reading must reflect in the design of workable flexible spaces, with zones for quiet reading and reflection, academic research, social networking and information exchange, technology access areas and, most importantly, zones that promote books and the love of reading.

Merging Arabic Culture into a Reading Culture

Much has been made of the oral traditions of the region being a predicating factor in the challenges of developing a reading culture (Shannon, 2003). However, by embracing these traditions, the library can promote storytelling, reading circles and discussions from shared books, poetry and other sources as part of the reading experience. It is also important that reading takes place in the first language and include books related to Arabic stories, traditions and cultures.

In many HCT libraries, story time or reading aloud sessions are encouraged, often with student mentors reading to more inexperienced readers. Social interaction with reading is important in this cultural context, because learning often takes place in a social context. Libraries have

exciting opportunities to merge traditional customs of social networking with new media, using social networking technologies to promote discussion about books and reading. The ADWC library has used wikis, blogs, and websites such as *LibraryThing* to engage students in books and reading. Future initiatives include the *One Book One Campus* concept, which encourages everyone on campus to read and discuss a book in both physical and virtual meetings spaces (see, http://www.firstyearreading.fsu.edu/).

A reading culture must be considered part of Arab culture, not just a western cultural influence. A colleague reported a student querying whether reading bedtime stories to children was something that happens in western movies, but not necessarily in real life. We need to transform Arabic people into reading celebrities, perhaps by marketing reading using Arabic role models, especially those who appeal to the younger generation. By using themes, personalities, and real life Arabic situations, we can encourage a grassroots reading culture, which will merge new reading traditions with old, to create a truly authentic Arabic reading culture.

An Educational Technologist's Perspective

The students that we teach today have grown up with technology, surrounded with mp3 players, mobile phones, and computers. By the time students reach college, they will have sent countless emails and text messages. They will have spent 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (Prensky, 2001). With the advent of mobile technology, students have instant and continuous access to the internet. Electronic devices, the internet, email, and instant messaging are an integral part of their lives now and has changed the way that students read and use language.

Since 2002, Web 2.0 has emerged as the name for a more user-centered web. It aims to enhance creativity, information sharing, collaboration and functionality of the web (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0). With the advent of this technology, website visitors now can easily contribute to the creation of web pages, formerly an exclusive privilege of website owners. Wikis, blogs, discussion forums, and social networking are popular forms of Web 2.0 sites which HCT students visit regularly. Wikipedia is among the most prominent examples of a Web 2.0 website. It was launched in 2001 and is currently the largest and most popular general reference work on the internet (Tancer, 2007). There are more than 2,000 articles being added each day by its community of users. These activities encourage reading and writing as users read articles of interest, comment on, discuss, and edit them.

Student reading and writing has been similarly encouraged by the growth of blogging and there has been a dramatic increase in the number of blogs that have appeared on a variety of topics and interests. There are now more than seventy million blogs with approximately 17 posts being made to them every second (Seaver, 2007). Reading and writing is at the core of this technology when users read about the different issues and items and then leave their opinions as comments for others to read and comment on. Discussion forums are another popular Web 2.0 technology where their very existence is dependent on a community of users who are prepared to write posts and leave replies to others' questions and opinions.

Most Emirati students at HCT have used Wikipedia, blogs and discussion forums. A focus group comprising of UAE female students from HCT's B.Ed. in Information Technology program looked at how their reading was affected by new technology. All students indicated that they would use their laptops for reading more than they would use books. When asked what they were reading, initially academic and course related material was mentioned. However, students also read blogs and websites about items of interest to them. Most students had contributed to the creation of pages on the Wikipedia site, as an education assignment.

The Meaning of Reading in the Digital Age

As student scores on standardized reading tests have declined or stagnated, some argue that hours spent reading on the internet diminishes literacy, lowers attention spans, and destroys a common culture that exists only through the reading of books (Rich, 2008). But, in comparing the effects of reading online and reading books and magazines, it has been found that in the online setting, students who spend a lot of time reading cover a lot more content but at a more superficial level than their counterparts reading traditional materials (Bauerlein, 2008).

Traditional books have a pre-determined beginning, middle and end, where readers focus on one author's vision for a sustained period. On the internet, readers can visit many sites quickly, composing their own beginnings, middles and ends (Rich, 2008). As students read web text mainly as headlines, captions and short excerpts, then it is being experienced primarily as information and entertainment, and is not conducive to sustained engagement in writings of greater length (Giola & Iyengar, 2008). This may be attributed to the fact that reading web text is slower than reading similar paper text (Johnson, 2008). This leads to a realization that the internet is not a replacement for the "… profoundly imaginative and interpretative act of reading" (Giola & Iyengar, 2008, p. 1). While these initial findings, if shown to be representative of web readers in general, do not paint the brightest of pictures for the future of spelling, grammar, vocabulary growth, and contextual learning, a new reading culture is created that can be advantageous to a broader range of students.

Reading E-books

The growth of e-books on a variety of topics and the devices to display them shows that technology is making literature itself more accessible. E-books are provided to students today as an alternative to regular textbooks. The convenience of features such as searching, note-taking, and bookmarking make them attractive alternatives to regular textbooks. However, e-books are most useful for research and study. Only 10% of participants in a recent study on e-book usage trends reported reading an e-book for leisure, while 78% and 56% respectively used e-books for research and study (Springer, 2008). This trend can be explained when looking at the advantages of using e-books over regular books. E-books are easy to find, and relevant content can be searched more easily, especially using keywords, while a large number of books can be carried on a mobile device with ease. All of these factors are important for students and researchers. However, when looking at reading for pleasure, reading on a screen is relatively difficult and using an e-book reader or mobile device in place of a book comes second to the traditional experience of holding a book on your hands while flicking through the pages. It seems that e-

books are most suited to situations where users need to locate specific information and, as such, e-books should be seen as complementary to print books (Springer, 2008).

The previously mentioned focus group reported using e-books frequently when doing coursework research. This was in line with the results of the Springer survey (ibid). When asked about the advantages of e-books over traditional books, students cited convenience in searching, and the number of books you could save on your laptop as the biggest advantages. Some disadvantages included the fact that reading on a screen is not as comfortable as reading a book and that it is slower to get the meaning of a paragraph in an e-book. When asked about reading for pleasure, none of the students had read an e-book for pleasure but had read library books instead.

There is scope for great advances in e-book technology that is likely to make them more attractive to users. E-books' displays need longer battery life and better digital paper to reduce user eye strain. Additionally, the range of curricula resources can be improved to appeal to a wider student audience. Reading for pleasure can also be accommodated by ensuring that there is no difference between the titles available in the bookshop and for e-book readers. The success of e-books is also dependent on freely available texts without the need to purchase expensive licenses or subscribe to e-book providers. However, it must be remembered that putting e-books and e-book readers in students' hands is not the aim of this process; it is only a stepping stone towards the goal of assisting students gain and regularly practice the skills of 21st century literacy in today's information environment.

A Curriculum Development Perspective

One barrier to the teaching and learning of reading is a lack of locally-relevant or otherwise appropriate materials that appeal to teachers and students. This is particularly an issue in terms of professional curriculum development by commercial publishers who provide schools with language textbooks, story and non-fiction books, and graded readers. Before looking at the specific needs of the UAE and how publishers do or do not address them, it is useful to review the curriculum development process to identify factors that help and hinder the creation of locally-developed materials, particularly from the perspective of a commercial publisher.

Both individual teachers and major international publishers go through several of the same steps in creating learning materials: needs assessment, clarifying the objectives and educational strategies, identifying the support necessary for teachers to get the most out of the materials, and implementing the materials with a feedback loop so that they can be improved in future.

Needs Assessment

A publisher first looks at a market and decides if gaps in the curriculum lead to certain teacher or learner needs not being met. These gaps may appear when there is no other publisher addressing a particular market's needs, or are not addressing them in a particularly effective way. New market needs arise when a publisher recognizes changes in a market, for example, through a major change in a national educational policy encouraging the teaching of English at an earlier

age. But publishers also identify market needs if other publishers' textbooks have, over time, become dated and irrelevant.

Many teachers respond to perceptions of a lack of suitable materials when their students fail to meet expectations. Teachers then adapt and create their own materials through trial and error and these sometimes form the basis of professionally published materials; teachers have a role in contacting publishers to make them aware of gaps in the curriculum and any shortcomings of textbooks they may be using. A publisher may not act on teacher feedback immediately, but such feedback can help to make publishers aware of the issues involved and may even lead to the teacher in question being hired as a consultant or writer on a new publishing project.

Objectives of New Materials

The objectives of any new materials need to be clarified. The *British National Strategies Standards* for primary children, for example, emphasize the reading skills of predicting, questioning, clarifying, imagining, and summarizing. "To varying extents, these skills draw upon linguistic and cognitive resources. In concert they can be used to ensure that children are able to build coherent mental models of the texts they read" (_____. 2009, np; see http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk). Different objectives are identified according to the age and abilities of students.

An important, and surprisingly recent consideration in reading objectives, is promoting the *enjoyment* of reading; this recognizes the fact that learners who enjoy what they read will read more. Other objectives include pre-, during- and post-reading objectives ranging from learning how to read a variety of texts for different purposes and in different ways to assessing one's reading and setting goals for improvement.

Educational Approach

Approaches to reading have been slow to change. Richards (2001) identifies the major methods as having the greatest dominance in this chronology:

- Grammar Translation Method (1800 – 1900)
- Direct Method (1890 – 1930)
- Structural Method (1930 – 1960)
- Reading Method (1920 – 1950)
- Audio-lingual Method (1950 – 1970)
- Situational Method (1950 – 1970)
- Communicative Method (1970 – present)

The communicative method looks set to continue as the dominant approach in language learning, despite enduring controversy (see Swan 1985; Bax 2003; Harmer 2003). Other approaches are often developed and shifts of emphasis, such as phonics or whole language movements, influence the creation of new materials. Too often, however, publishers pay scant attention to educational strategies, instead relying on conservative and outdated methodologies.

Support

Publishers have long provided support in the form of teacher books and big books for primary students, but are now increasingly expected to provide additional support such as in the form of CDs, CD-ROMs, test banks, photocopyable masters, and interactive websites. Such resources help to address the needs of remedial learners and those with different learning styles.

Feedback

The development of any new learning materials benefits from a feedback loop that invites stakeholders to comment and contribute. Publishers' websites make this both possible and easy by inviting comment and answering questions.

The UAE Context

UAE students form a cohesive group, bound by ethnicity, traditions, language, religion and, to some degree, socio-economic status. Their cohesiveness, in some ways, forms a barrier against the learning of new languages as they function perfectly well in Arabic, or in a mixed code of Arabic and English.

In terms of language learning, a starting point for many language textbooks in a uni-lingual context such as the UAE, is an awareness of contrastive linguistics. Contrastive linguistics help to identify typical problems a learner is likely to face based on the differences between the students' target language and first language.

In the case of the UAE, there needs to be more systematic work done in the critical differences between Arabic and English; although there are a few useful references dating back one or two decades, there is a lack of ongoing and comprehensive consideration of the differences; an ERIC search for the keywords *Arabic* and *contrastive linguistics* showed the most recent article to be one done on the Arabic particle *fa* (see Saeed & Fareh, 2006), with relatively little preceding it.

Informal needs assessments of UAE students have, from time to time, expressed the idea that they are not part of a reading culture. A proper needs assessment should determine not only why this is so, but also the reading needs of students and graduates at different levels so appropriate learning materials can be tailored to the objective of creating a reading culture. Reading materials also need to take into consideration the social and religious traditions of the UAE, ensuring that no offense is given while still introducing students to the wider world.

In terms of approach, materials aimed at teaching students in the UAE need to consider differences in learning styles between students elsewhere who traditionally see English as a language of opportunity and UAE students whose socio-economic status and wealth of opportunities within the UAE may make them less motivated in learning a second language. Conversely, the widespread access to technology among many Emirati students (for example, most HCT students are issued laptops and campuses are technology rich) means that they easily have access to online support where it is offered by publishers.

The Economics of Book Publishing

Publishing a new textbook is an expensive process and is never entered into lightly. It has to fit with a publisher's business plan and the first questions asked are about the size of the market and, therefore, the expected return, and secondly, whether any of the publisher's existing textbooks might be adopted or adapted. Markets differ. Some countries, with small populations, are willing to pay more for their textbooks while other markets, such as China, are so large that even a smaller return per book can make for a significant profit. As the economic stakes are invariably high, projects without financial incentives are not explored.

The population base of the UAE is relatively small which makes it unattractive to publishers hoping for large returns. Although Arabic is nominally a pan-Middle Eastern language, it has enough dialectical differences to be mutually unintelligible among some populations. The dialect of the UAE and neighboring states referred to as Gulf Arabic. This makes a contrastive analysis of the local language both narrower and more necessary.

Foregoing any detailed needs analysis, textbook publishers typically put forward their established titles or, in some cases, modify them for the local market. Modifications often include changing the photographs in a language textbook to local scenes and ethnicities. This can be done on a superficial level without changing the text. In other cases, the text is revised or censored to take into consideration local sensibilities. For example, activities thought to be unsuitable for young locals might be rewritten. These might include eating forbidden foods like pork, celebrating certain religious events like Christmas, and dressing and acting inappropriately, such descriptions of young women wearing bikinis and mingling with young men at the beach.

In a more general sense, a localized textbook should take into consideration the vocabulary necessary for a student to discuss the local environment in a meaningful way. Words such as *camel* and *palm tree* are relatively low-frequency in most English primers, but would be essential for the education of young Emiratis.

In some cases, the UAE has taken the lead in publishing, such as through the *Kalima* (Arabic for *word*) project, which aims to translate 100 English classics works of fiction and non-fiction each year into Arabic (see http://www.kalima.ae/new/index_en.php). The dedication to, and extensive funding of, the educational system by UAE authorities suggests that any real needs in the creation of new learning materials can and will be taken into careful consideration and operationalized.

Conclusion

The move toward a reading culture among Emirati students in the UAE is not likely to be an easy one. However, analyzing and approaching the issues from a variety of perspectives can help in offering a variety of innovative solutions that, together, may make a difference over the course of a generation. Perhaps the single most important behavioral change in creating a culture of reading would be for the current generation to translate their own exposure to reading from the above initiatives into habits of reading to their children for pleasure and encouraging their children to read on their own.

Few countries in the world have experienced the development seen in the UAE over the past 30 years; it remains to be seen how that development helps foster a literate and literary population that promotes the educational values that will sustain future generations.

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