DEVELOPING READING AND WRITING SKILLS OF LEARNERS’ FROM ARABIC-SPEAKING BACKGROUNDs

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ABSTRACT
The number of native Arabic-speaking students coming to America to study English in university programs has grown over the past few years, and continues to be substantial. It has also been noticed by the English Language Institute (ELI) at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) that these students often struggle more with reading activities in class, completing them slowly, and having difficulty understanding why their work is incorrect. In addition, it seems that this group fails reading and writing to a greater extent than listening and speaking, which suggests an imbalance in the students’ language learning progress. The purpose of the study is to solve the problems associated with reading and writing in English that Arabic speaking students currently have using the 'read and copy' strategy. After using the 'read and copy' strategy for a three week period, participants felt confident that it improved reading, punctuation, and spelling.

INTRODUCTION
The number of native Arabic-speaking students coming to America to study English in university programs has grown according to Arab News in a November 2012 report of the nonprofit Institute of International Education. Currently more than 71,000 Saudis are studying in the United States. The number has increased 98 percent between the years 2005-2012 and continues to be substantial. During this time, teachers at the Sam Houston State University’s (SHSU) English Language Institute (ELI) have observed that this cohort struggles markedly with reading and writing, particularly in comparison with other groups.
of students. It has also been noticed by the ELI at the University that these students often struggle more with reading activities in class, completing them slowly, and having difficulty understanding why their work is incorrect. In addition, it seems that this group fails reading and writing exams to a greater extent than listening and speaking exams, which suggests an imbalance in the students’ language learning progress. The purpose of the study is to solve the problems associated with writing in English that Arabic speaking students currently have. It is hypothesized that an activity named, ‘read and copy’ based on Susser and Robb’s (1990) article entitled, “EFL Extensive Reading Instruction: Research and Procedure”, would be effective for Arabic speaking students. Students would read a short article in a magazine, website, newspaper etc. of their liking and as they are reading, copy word for word what they are reading in 3-5 word ‘chunks’ without looking at what they are writing on their paper for five minutes. Regularly doing ‘read and copy’, both in and out of class, could be effective in helping Arabic speaking students read in chunks and to use their eyes, rather than fingers, to follow the text. It could also be effective in writing skills such as learning punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure. When ‘read and copy’ is practiced over a three week period, it is hypothesized that it will help Arabic speaking students learning English as a second language (ESL) become better writers, improve punctuation, spelling and improve their ability to understand different sentence structures and collocations. Collocations are partly or fully fixed expressions that become established through repeated context-dependent use. For example, phrases such as, crystal clear. The following questions were asked for this research project.

1) Will native Arabic speaking students, taking intermediate English language courses at the Sam Houston State University (SHSU) English Language Institute (ELI), improve in their English punctuation, spelling, and improve their ability to understand different sentence structures and collocations after three weeks of using the ‘read and copy’ strategy at home?

2) After completing the ‘read and copy’ strategy for three weeks do the results indicate that the students felt the strategy worked and would they use it in the future?

3) Should the ‘read and copy’ strategy be combined with relevant class-based reading activities in the ESL students’ classroom?

ACTION/LITERATURE REVIEW
The literature revealed several difficulties regarding the reading and writing abilities of native Arabic speakers learning English as their second language (L2). The writing issues faced by the native Arabic speaker learning English as their second language (L2) is evident in the studies by Abu Rass (2011) and Eid Alhaisoni (2012). Rass’ study examines cultural transfer issues that all students learning English face. This impacts Arabic speaking student’s first language (L1) and Muslim culture as well. Rass states, “Cultural transfer is likely to happen when students learn to write in English as a second or foreign language because their behavior is influenced by their first culture; the first culture saturates the second language (L2) writing experience and influences its product as well” (p. 206). Alhaisoni (2012) studies revisions that native Arabic speaking students make and recommends that EFL teachers include clear instructions to their native Arabic speaking
students when focusing on writing in their second language (L2). Teachers should also be aware of the individual differences between their students and try to use different approaches to teaching writing at the university level. These studies indicate that teachers should use relevant class-based reading activities like ‘read and copy’ in the ESL students’ classroom.

Alsheikh and Mokhturi (2011) researched the metacognitive reading strategies used by native speakers of Arabic when reading in English and Arabic. Their results indicate that it is harder for the students to read in English than in their first language (L1), so teachers of native Arabic speaking students should raise student’s awareness of reading strategies by explicitly teaching the strategies to use such as the ‘read and copy’ strategy. Furthermore, Hayes-Harb’s (2006) study showed that native Arabic speaking students struggle with letter identification while reading in English. Implications from this study have shown that when teaching ESL to native Arabic speaking students one needs to understand that native Arabic speaking students “difficulties in reading English text are influenced by the transfer of reading strategies from L1 to L2” (p. 336). Teachers should train the students using relevant class-based reading activities to recognize that “vowel information distinguishes words in English” and a teacher should also “provide the student with a list of words of similar consonant structures and ask them to define each word on the list” (p. 336). Lastly, Michael Fender’s (2003) study results indicate that Arabic and Japanese native speakers have different word level processing abilities. Arabic speaking participants exhibited difficulties with word recognition skills in comparison to the Japanese speaking participants on a lexical decision task. The Arabic speaking participants did show more accuracy in “integrating English words into larger phrase and clause units of meaning...” (p. 305). Fender suggests that “Arab ESL learners should be engaged in reading more English texts, particularly since it is the best way to develop orthographic knowledge” (p. 308).

The reading strategies and complicatedness the students had were evident in the studies conducted by Michael Fender (2003), Hayes-Harb (2006), and Alsheikh and Mokhturi (2011). All of the studies suggested that teachers of native Arabic speakers in ESL and EFL classes be given explicit instruction as to the reading strategies for them to use, engage in reading more text in English, clear instructions for writing in their second language (L2), and to be aware that culture interferes with their writing in English. The research supports the ‘read and copy’ strategy to be used during this project that native Arabic speaking students at the university level learning English as their second language (L2) will become better writers, improve punctuation, spelling, improve their ability to understand different sentence structures, and collocations after completing the three week strategy.

Observation/Methodology
In the early stages of the project, my research questions were informed by my own interest and ideas as an instructor at ELI, as well as prior research from previous research on the topic of reading skills among native Arabic-speaking students studying English. As an EFL and ESL instructor, I was hoping to improve my own teaching as well as those around me with the results. I was also interested in the influence of Arabic students’ reading processes in their first language (L1) on their reading in English. After reading Burns’ book *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioners* (2010), my
growing understanding of the methodology of action research as well as the scope of the project led me to refine my questions. In order to understand the exact nature of the reading difficulties faced by native Arabic speaking students in a university setting, I conducted two ‘pre-research’ activities. Firstly, I interviewed the reading and writing teacher at the ELI about students’ previous and current reading habits in their first language (L1). I gathered this information to determine in what language they were reading most frequently. This interview revealed that most of the native Arabic speaking students did and still do read commonly in Arabic. They read a variety of texts including news, magazines, religious texts, and books and articles relevant to their areas of interest. Secondly, I observed two classes; levels 3 and 4. However, only 4 of the 8 male Saudi Arabian students in level 3 fully participated in the project to the end. In their reading and writing classes I noticed some habits that are understood to be usual for English language learners (ELL) at an early stage in their learning success. The students would mouth words, run their finger along the lines, stopping at unfamiliar lexis and translating questions or words. In terms of process, I noticed a lack of a methodical approach utilizing effective reading strategies. For example, the students generally did not skim the text, use prediction, relied primarily on their memory to answer the questions in the text, asked by the teacher, or in the teacher handout. I decided to focus on addressing these second language learning habits and use the information gathered from the pre-research activities to guide me in refining my research questions.

**DATA COLLECTION/ANALYSIS**

I collected qualitative data for the purposes of this project. I triangulated the qualitative data by first interviewing my colleague, observing the students reading English texts and handouts in class and by having the students complete a questionnaire at the end of the project. I also kept a reflective journal which helped to refine my initial research questions. The journal helped me to refine my questions over the first week of observation by allowing me to reflect back on what I had written down during my colleague’s interview and observation of the students. I observed the students during one of their morning reading/writing classes on the SHSU campus. The 4 male Saudi Arabian students were asked to complete a worksheet by filling in the words to complete the sentences that had blank spots by using their texts and notes similar to cloze exercises.

**Table 1: Observations of 4 male Saudi Arabian students in their ELI reading/writing class**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I observed:</th>
<th>What I thought:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students mouthing words, running fingers along the lines of text.</td>
<td>Students seem unfamiliar with their L2 and show signs of slow readers in their L2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stopping at unfamiliar lexis and translating questions or words. Did not skim the text, use prediction, relied primarily on their memory to answer the questions in the text. Asked the teachers help throughout the assignment.</td>
<td>Students do not show confidence in their vocabulary up to this point. Students rely too much on the teacher at this point to help them answer their questions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the end of the 3 weeks, I asked all 4 male Saudi Arabian students who participated in the intermediate level 3 class to complete a survey about the reading activity, in which all four participating students completed. Students were given the option to complete the task at home, so I cannot be sure if they did the strategy effectively or not. However, I did review the student’s classwork both before and after the strategy and also interviewed my colleague to determine that improvement did occur over the three week period. The survey was designed to find out whether students felt the aims of the activity were achieved (these were clearly stated on the survey); if they enjoyed it and whether they believed it would help them in/outside of their classes in the future. I closely analyzed the responses of the 4 male Saudi Arabian students and found this qualitative data to be particularly enlightening (see Tables 2 and 3). In summary, the survey revealed that the participants believed that some or all of the ‘read and copy’ strategy aims were met.

**Table 2: Did you enjoy read and copy?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read and copy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: Do you think this can help you in future reading and writing classes?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read and copy</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also, the students believed that the strategy could help them in the future, although one student was less sure about this and wrote maybe only with his writing classes. In addition, they also enjoyed or somewhat enjoyed the strategies, which is probably an important part of their success. With reference to our research question, this information suggests that the consistent and systematic reading approach introduced through my action did indeed assist them to become better readers with stronger comprehension and enjoyment of writing. I also asked the following open-ended questions in the survey (see example in Figure 1):

- What did you enjoy most about read and copy? Why?
- Would you continue to use read and copy inside/outside of the classroom in the future? Why?

All but one student reported that they enjoyed ‘read and copy’ because it helped them understand writing structure and improved their spelling when writing. The ‘read and copy’ strategy was a strategy that students believed they would continue to use in the future. The ‘read and copy’ strategy aided students’ reading and writing skills throughout the 3 week process. Overall, I would say that the read and copy’ strategy demonstrated to be helpful to the students and one in which the students said they will keep using inside/outside of future classrooms.
Figure 1: Sample of student response to survey open-ended questions.

2. Do you think this can help you in future reading and writing classes? Please circle one.
   - Yes
   - No

3. What did you enjoy most about read and copy? Why?
   1. That am working and reading,
   2. I had have more experie when am writing.

4. Would you continue to use read and copy inside/outside of the classroom in the future?
   Why?
   1. Kas.
   2. Its helpful.

CONCLUSIONS
Participating in this action research project has been an inspiring and satisfying experience which has not only shed light on my area of interest, second language acquisition (SLA), but also provided teachers with a valuable framework for exploring future challenges in the teaching of SLA. In undertaking this research, my main priority was to improve students’ writing skills and confidence in this area. This issue has been customary at the English Language Institute (ELI), with both teachers and Arabic students being aware of it. As such, I am delighted that my data suggested my action was successful in that the students not only accepted the ‘read and copy’ strategy, but also reported that the strategy they attempted was useful and enjoyable.

There were other variables which could have contributed to the students’ achievement although motivation in the level 4 class was not one of them. There was a great sense of purpose, teamwork, and motivation with 4 of the 8 students in level 3, which led to their improvement in writing. One student said, ‘I can write fast and I think it can do its good.’ A limitation I felt about the project was that I had wanted to have the students attempt the
‘read and copy’ strategy in class, but because of my colleague’s busy curriculum I was required to allow the students to complete the activity on their own at home every day for 3 weeks. I also desired that I could have had more weeks and a larger volume of students to use the strategy and that the students would have been more accepting of attempting the project, but new semester time limits and student motivation appeared to be a factor in my planning.

Overall, I have learned the value of Action Research with responding to classroom challenges by planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Additionally, I have gained a deeper insight into the writing methods used by native speaking Arabic students in the English Language Institute (ELI) and feel as though I have an initial plan to help them overcome their reading problems. Since this initial study I have conducted the ‘read and copy’ strategy with 2 of my own level 3 Arabic speaking students in the English Language Institute (ELI). I continued to use the strategy as a homework assignment in the writing course I taught from January 2014 to March 2014. The use of the strategy was over an eight week period and the 2 students were able to use what they learned from the strategy to show improvements in their essay writing for the course. I have also realized through this study and further studies using the ‘read and copy’ strategy that it is essential for students to feel that their difficulties are of importance and teachers are taking steps to address them.

REFERENCES
Alhaisoni, E. (2012). A Think-aloud protocols investigation of Saudi English major students” writing revision strategies in L1 (Arabic) and L2 (English). English Language Teaching, 5(9), 144-154. doi:10.5539/elt.v5n9p144


**Appendix A**

*Questionnaire asked of students.*

**Action Research Project: Developing reading and writing skills of learners from Arabic-speaking backgrounds**

This is a research project to observe if in three weeks you improve your writing skills including punctuation, spelling and your ability to understand different sentence structures and collocations. This is a take home project to do on your own time. I want to thank all of you ahead of time who participate in this study. If you have any questions my email is stdjaf19@shsu.edu and my name is Jason.

**Please answer the following questions:**

Name: _________________________________.

1. Country of origin (where are you from?):
   _____________________________________.

2. Country of education (what country did you go to school in?):
   _____________________________________.

3. Number of years in college and where:
   _______________________________________.
   _______________________________________.
1. ‘Read and copy’
You will be asked to read every day at home in your spare time until March 1, 2013. You can choose whatever you wish to read in English. You will read for 5 minutes in 3–5-word ‘chunks’ and at the same time (simultaneously) copy these sentences into your notebooks, note cards etc. at home. You must ensure all punctuation and spelling are correct. You do not have to turn in your notebook or note cards etc. at the end of the project.

On March 1, 2013 please fill out the questions below and then turn in both sheets to your teacher.

1. Did you enjoy read and copy? Please circle one.
   
   Yes  No

2. Do you think this can help you in future reading and writing classes? Please circle one.
   
   Yes  No

3. What did you enjoy most about read and copy? Why?

_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________

4. Would you continue to use read and copy inside/outside of the classroom in the future? Why?

_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________

Biographical note:

Jason Fuqua is an Instructor at Sam Houston State University. He is currently working on his doctorate in literacy in the Language, Literacy and Special Populations department at Sam Houston State University. He holds a MEd in International Literacy from Sam Houston State University and has taught EFL in China, Japan, and Taiwan. His current research interests include plagiarism, English Language teaching, and digital plagiarism and academic dishonesty.