

RATIONALE FOR TEACHING LISTENING & READING IN ARABIC STUDIES: THE NEED FOR A PROFICIENCY ORIENTED APPROACH

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Abstract

One very fashionable advocacy in language teaching in general and Arabic language teaching in particular is the integrated teaching of listening and reading. The language scholars and researchers have recommended a great deal of theorizing about second language acquisition, especially, since the early 21st century and that research literature abounds in approaches, theories, models, laws, and principles. Too many models have been built and taken for granted too soon and this has stilled relevant research. Practitioners who have been buffeted across the tears by pressure to adopt different approaches to listening and reading, due to the changing winds of theory may tend to agree with this resistance to theoretical “bandwagon”. This work explores the need to advocate for a strategy based integrative proficiency approach to the teaching of listening and reading so that the other language skills of speaking and writing are used to reinforced the teaching of any of the skills. The paper claims that this approach derives its significance from the proficiency force of Arabic language skills and perceives its goals as the development of communicative competence to all students.

Keywords: Listening, Reading, Arabic, Proficiency Integrative, Approach

Introduction

Barnett (1989) maintains that reading has always held an important place in Foreign and second-language programme, with the possible exception of the periods when audio-lingual methodology dominated in American classes, in the early 1960s. But she adds that reading is now seen in a different light, namely "as communication, as a mental process, as the reader's active participation in the creation of meaning, as a manipulation of strategies, as

a receptive rather than a positive skill. Byrnes (1985 p.78) and Barnett (1989 p.2), regard reading as a source of "comprehensible input". Reading becomes valued in the communicative classroom, especially when authentic materials can serve the dual purpose of developing reading skills and of fostering cultural insights and understanding. Barnett goes further to list other reasons for including reading skill development as a vital part of the second language curriculum.

- (1) Reading is essential in the teaching of literature, which remains an important goal in many programs.
- (2) It is a skill that can be maintained after students complete formal language study.
- (3) It fosters the development and refinement of literacy skills. Indeed, second language reading research may have a significant impact on our understanding of this larger issue of literacy which is of national concern.

Although, most of the research studies involving the development of Foreign language receptive skill have been devoted to understanding the reading process, there is a very strong interest in the language teaching community today to increase students' listening comprehension skills as well. However, caution has to be taken, not to apply a greater facility in listening than speaking, because this may not hold across different languages, and there may in fact be a negative offset for some languages.

Long (1986) argues that teaching oral skills is teaching only half of the process of communication and adds that the students gain a sense of confidence with the language which their listening attitudes are well developed. This statement indicates that listening should not be thought of as an "activity" but taught directly as a skill in its own right.

Let me cite Joiner (1986, 1997) who identifies four trends that have brought more attention to the development of listening skills in recent years.

- (1) Comprehension based approaches, which advocate a pre-speaking "or silent period" and which maintain that listening is the foundation skill for all language development;
- (2) Emphasis on the receptive skill in general, which has been growing in the early 1980s;
- (3) The prevalence of functional national approaches and concepts, with their emphasis on fostering an interest in the use of authentic material for listening and reading and emphasizing communicative skill development. Authentic reading and listening materials, as well as writing activities (in a Communicative Curriculum) that involve analysis and interaction with texts, give adult learners more of an opportunity to engage in challenging tasks appropriate to their level of cognitive maturity.

Adults spend 45 percent of their time listening and 11 to 6 percent of their time reading. Listening takes place most often in either face to face conversational encounters or in the presence of the speaker (as when listening to a lecture, public debate, or theoretical performance), written communicative was the primary means of sharing information at a distance. When one considers the enormous changes relating to the way information is received today, particularly with the advent of new and more interactive technologies, the amount of time spent in listening and/or reacting may be even higher.

In the past several decades, there has been a growing interest in designing materials to teach comprehension more actively, especially through the use of culturally authentic text, videotaped materials and computer assisted instructors that allows for greater interaction between the learner and the text. Teachers need more access to listening and reading materials based on natural discourse along with appropriate comprehension activities that teach the process of comprehension so that the skills are transferable to other situations and texts.

In addition to these new and better materials, (CD-ROMs) that are now packaged with text books affords much better sound quality) teachers need ideas for restructuring and sequencing instructions, so that a classroom plan for teaching listening and reading comprehension can be devised. Effective ways to integrate comprehension and productive skill with the teaching of culture are also needed. Some specific ideas for planning instructions of this type in Arabic class are provided in this work. However it would be useful to quickly reflect on some of the similarities and differences in listening and reading tasks, many of which derive from the relationship between speech and writing.

Similarities in Listening and Reading

Although, the goals and some of the global process in listening and Reading comprehension are often similar, the nature of the input (speech or writing) and the way in which that input is processed are quite different. There are several ways in which speech differs from writing. According to Richard (1983) written discourse – particularly in texts produced for a wide and essentially anonymous audience – is normally organized in well-formed grammatical sentences arranged in coherent paragraph. Ideas are planned and produced by one person, allowing the discourse to flow logically as the topic is developed. In contrast, spoken discourse – particularly in conversational exchanges – can often include ungrammatical or reduced forms, dropped words and sentences without subjects, verbs, auxiliaries or other parts of speech. Conversations are often marked by pauses, hesitations, false stories and fillers and topics can shift as the conversation is co-constructed with others.

A number of things may be left unsaid because both parties assume some common knowledge. In many type of written discourse, however, meaning can not be negotiated directly with the reader and common knowledge can not always be assumed. It is observed that aural comprehension may be more difficult than reading. This is found out to be in study involving beginning and intermediate students of Arabic language of the Lagos State University, where their reading comprehension was superior to their comprehension in listening. This reading advantage appeared to diminish by the time the student reached the third year of their programme. However this does not preclude the possibility of initial advantage for listening in the case of children who are learning to read Arabic as their native language, the opposite appears to be true for the adults engaged in second language learning like Arabic in Nigeria.

Having a text presented twice, either in listening or reading significantly benefited students at all levels. However, our experience with our students at the University indicated that for beginning students, reading and rereading resulted in superior comprehension to listening and re-listening. We propose that, this may be due, in part, to the fact that listeners can not control the pace of presentation of the Arabic text, and often appear to be "grasping at works". This relates to what Stevick (1984) calls the "accessibility" of the text which differ in two modalities. In reading one can look at what was read before and also look ahead to get an idea of what is coming. The listener however, can not do this, and any intention to grant what is to be said, may easily cause him or her to loose an important part of the message, or even all of it.

There are various types of oral speech students of Arabic can listen to and various written discourse, they can read. In this work we identify four basic modes of Arabic speech.

1. Spontaneous free Arabic speech – This is characterized by the inter-activeness and production constraints reviewed above.
2. Deliberate free Arabic speech – This is characterized by interviews and discussion.
3. Oral presentation of a written Arabic text – This can be found in newscasts, more formal commentaries, and lectures, and
4. Oral presentation of a fixed Arabic Script such that produced on stage or in a film.

Written discourse also has a variety of text types. Some of the kinds of Arabic texts which readers might encounter in the second language are identified in this work.

1. **Arabic literary texts:** such as novel, short stories plays, poems, essays and the like.

2. **Specialized or technical text:** such as report, news textbooks, handbooks, statistical data, diagram etc.
3. **Correspondence:** such as personal or business records notes or telegrams.
4. **Journalistic literature:** Such as article from N/papers and magazine, editorials headlines, classified ads, weather reports etc.
5. **Informational Texts:** Such as dictionary, guideboards, phrase books, telephone books, time table, maps, signs, price listing etc.
6. **Miscellaneous realia of various kinds:** such as tickets, menus, recipes, advertisements etc.

To these lists, of course, can be added newer types of texts that are characteristic of the information age, from e-mail correspondence to the texts found in a variety of formats on internet sites as well as in multimedia course materials. These types of resources often present learners with information that requires the integration of listening and reading skill and can easily involve productive skill such as writing as well. In addition, texts such as these are often rich in cultural information and can help Arabic learner make connections to other disciplines, all of which serves to develop the abilities that have been outlined in the standard for foreign language learning (1996, 2006).

Teaching Listening Comprehension in Arabic classes

Some processes and Skills involved in listening

There are certain basis processes involved in listening, we shall propose here a tentative model of the listening process that involve the following steps:-

- 1- Determination of the type of interaction or speech event (such as conversation, lecture, discussion or debate) in which the listener is involved.
- 2- Recalling scripts (or *schemative*) relevant to the situation.
- 3- Making inference about the goals of the speaker.
- 4- Determining the propositional meaning of the utterances.
- 5- Assigning an illocutionary (functional) meaning to the message.
- 6- Remembering and acting upon the information, while deleting the original form of the message.

Apart from these, there are also some skills involved in teaching listening. These are categorized as micro skills. These skills range from very discrete tasks such as discriminating among individual sounds recognizing syntactic patterns, and identifying key words, to more global tasks, such as extracting main ideas and understanding the relationship among the parts of the discourse. Different listening activities can be devised to help the Arabic learners

develop the various micro skill at each level of proficiency and the choice of skills for a given tasks can be tailored to the nature of the specific objective for listening.

Planning Instruction for the development of listening

Proficiency in Arabic classes

How can Arabic Instructor determine which type of materials and tasks to use for listening Instruction for their students? There are some indications in the recent literature on comprehension that may help. Most scholars agree that at the lowest proficiency level, Listening materials that present very familiar and, or predictable content and that are relevant to students' interest will be best, given that the students will be able to use their linguistic skill knowledge of the world to aid them in comprehension when there are deficient. For example, videotaped Arabic materials can be especially useful at the lower range of proficiency because of the visual contextual support they provide as long as students know that they are not expected to understand every word.

As teachers design the tasks to be accomplished with various listening materials, they should keep in mind the normal or natural purpose for which someone might listen to a given text. The tasks need to be geared to such purposes but also to the overall level of competence of the students. One can expect, in general, that students will be able to understand the gist and / or a few main ideas in familiar passages at the lower level of proficiency and eventually extract more and more precise information of a detailed nature from a given listening texts as their proficiency develops. Beginning and intermediate students will need pre-listening actions to help them anticipate and predict the relevant content in the passage. Preliminary research indicates that multiple opportunities to listen for a variety of different purposes will also be helpful in increasing student's understanding.

Illustration cited below presents Lund's (1990) taxonomy for teaching second language listening. He suggests that this matrix be used to design instruction so that the full range of competencies in listening is practiced. The sample task given for purpose of illustration all relate to listening to an authentic text type: radio advertisements.

The six functions, listed below, refer to what the listener is trying to attend to in the passage. Each function thus represents a potential goal of listening comprehension. The six functions are described below:-

- 1- **Identification:** Recognition or discrimination of aspects of the message rather than the attention to the over all message Content. (Identification of words, word categories phonemic distinctions).

- 2- **Orientation:** Identification of important facts about the text, such as the participants, the situation, the general topic, the tone, the text type and the like.
- 3- **Main idea Comprehension:** Understanding of the higher-order ideas in the listening passage.
- 4- **Detail Comprehension:** Understanding of more specific Information. The amount of detail one can understand typically distinguishes the advanced listener from the intermediate.
- 5- **Full Comprehension:** Understanding the main and the support-line detail. This should be the goal of instruction in listening proficiency.
- 6- **Replication:** Ability to be able to reproduce the message in either the same modality (through the repetition of the content) or in a different modality (such as transcription or dictation).

These listener functions are combined with nine listening responses as follows:

- 1- **Doing:** This implies a physical response of some sort.
- 2- **Choosing** which involves activities such as putting picture in order or matching a product to an advertisement.
- 3- **Transferring:** This involves drawing, tracing a route, filling in a graph, or other kind of transferring of information from one modality to another.
- 4- **Answering:** such as completing a set of question, asking for specific information in the text.
- 5- **Condensing:** involving such activities as preparing an outline, taking note, or preparing captions for pictures based on the listening passage.
- 6- **Extending:** going beyond the text to create an ending, complete a partial transcript, change the text or embellish it in some way.
- 7- **Duplicating:** This proves that function of replication has been completed.
- 8- **Modeling:** Imitation of the feature of the taint or of the text as a whole.
- 9- **Conversing:** This goes with some kind of interaction with the text either in a face to face conversation or in using interactive video programmes.

Using Authentic Materials

Taking into cognizance, the communicative function of language, yet caution has to be taken in using only unedited and non-pedagogical materials in the classroom. This would seem to create more problem, than it would solve, since materials are often difficult to select, obtain or sequence for Arabic learners at lower proficiency level. Unmodified authentic discourse is often random in respect to vocabulary, structure, functions, content situation and

length, making some of it impractical for classroom Arabic teachers to integrate successfully into the curriculum of a frequent basis.

There are two types of authentic discourse:-

- 1- Unmodified authentic discourse which refers to language that occurred originally as a genuine act of communication.
- 2- Simulated authentic discourse which refers to language produced for pedagogical purpose but which exhibits features that have a high probability of occurrence in genuine acts of communication.

The simulated authentic discourse can be incorporate into the classrooms through the use of Semi scripts. A semi script is a set of note or a simple outline that is provided to the native speaker for the purpose of generating a monologue conversation that sound authentic. The note might include specific vocabulary or structures that should be incorporated or discussed. This may be recorded on audio or videotape for use in the classroom. The multimedia software can also be introduced. Effective multimedia must have the following characteristics:

1. It must be immediate.
2. It is interactive nature
3. It must be multi-sensory involving both linguistic and extra-linguistic cues.
4. It can be controlled by speaker and listeners through the use of simple strategy. The effectiveness of multimedia resources is the extent to which the medium can be compared to "face to face communication".

In addition to multimedia software packages, authentic materials for listening and reading can be found on the internet especially web links on the site of language specific professional organization, college, and university of foreign language departments, and individual faculty members. Many foreign language videos offer Arabic sub-titling and DVDs now provide multiple language tracks and the capability of viewing with or without subtitles. There are an increased number of software programs that offer language practice, instruction and /or entertainment. However, as multi-media software and resources become more plentiful, their various features will need to be evaluated as teachers consider whether to use them to supplement classroom instruction.

Various sample classroom activities that can be used for listening and reading activities in Arabic classes at intermediate level are provide below:-

Formats for Listening Comprehension

Sample I: Advertisement Text

Objective: Student should be made to identify products that are being advertised by matching pictures of the products to the passage heard.

Text: The Instructor may employ various radio commercials recorded from a target language situation.

Student task: Drawing of the products (or pictures if available) are marked with a letter (A, B, C, etc) and placed in front of the classroom. Students listen to the recorded advertisements one at a time. As they listen, they try to identify which product is being described by writing down the appropriate letter of the visual that matches the description.

In recursive listening activities, students listen to the same text several times each time with a different listening purpose.

Sample II: Announcement on Board

Objective: Student listen to a passage that includes announcements on board an airplane interspersed with conversation between two passengers. On the first listening, students attempt to distinguish between the formal register of the announcements and the informal register of conversation. On the second listening they will fill out a form with some pertinent flight information.

Pre-listening activities: The teacher orients the students to the passage by telling them that it takes place on an international flight. The teacher explains that the passage includes both formal and informal speech and asks the students to listen the first time for differences in tone of voice, speech overlap and delivery. They are instructed to raise their hands each time they hear the register shift.

Second listening: A form is designed in which the students fill out, as they listen to the passage a second time, this time attending to some important details.

Sample III: Inspecting Aircraft

Students listen to a brief news report about official order given to inspect aircraft that transport military personnel. They listen first to extract pertinent vocabulary in order to focus on the topic. The second cycle asks students to listen for the basic story line in the news report. A third and fourth hearing focus on supporting details.

First Listening: The instructor tells students that the news report they will hear deals with flying and asks them to write down some words they hear that deal with this topic.

Second Listening: The instructor probes the students' knowledge of the world to see if they can anticipate the general theme of the article. Students are asked to think of a recent airline disaster and see if the news story talks about it.

Third Listening: Students listening for reactions to the events and write down words associated with these reactions.

Fourth Listening: More detail is now elicited so that full comprehension of the news report is achieved.

In this kind of activity, students listen to material that corresponds to a visual aid of some kind and either identify a picture being described, identify objects within the picture, follow a map or diagram, or draw a simple sketch.

Teaching Reading Arabic Comprehension Techniques for teaching Reading Skills in Arabic Classes

This section presents how various reading Arabic comprehension formats can be used with Novice, intermediate, Advanced and superior level learners. Some activities are more appropriate to one level of proficiency. Many of them, however, can be used at various levels. To adapt a given sample activity format to a particular level of proficiency, an Arabic Instructor can simply choose an appropriate topic, create task demands that are congruent with reading purposes at that level, and adjust his or her expectations for accuracy in comprehension accordingly.

Five stages plans are suggested here for reading instruction that can be used in the classroom:

1. Pre-teaching/ Preparation Stage:

- (a) Brain storming to generate ideas that have a high probability of occurrence in the text;
- (b) Looking at visuals, headlines, titles, charts, or other contextual aids that are provided with the text;
- (c) Predicting or hypothesizing on the basis of like or first line of a text, what significance it might have or what might come next.

2. Skimming / Scanning Stage: Both of these steps are distinct processes involving, as we saw earlier, getting the gist (skimming) and locating specific information (scanning). Philips points out that the skilled readers do some scanning while attempting to skim a text; however, she feels that practice activities needed for this stage include:

- a. Getting the gist of short readings, paragraphs, or other graphic material;
- b. Identifying topic sentences and main ideas;
- c. Selecting the best paraphrase from multiple-choice options of the main idea of a text or of the conclusion;
- d. Matching subtitles with paragraphs;

- e. Filling in charts or forms with key concepts;
 - f. Creating titles or headlines for passages;
 - g. Making global judgments or reacting in some global fashion to a reading passage (p. 290).
- 3. Decoding/Intensive Reading Stage:** This stage is the most necessary when students are "learning to read" rather than reading to learn. Decoding involves guessing from context the meaning of unknown words or phrases. The extent of decoding that will go on in this stage will depend on the purpose for reading a given passage. Let me point out here that conscious, detailed decoding is not a common goal of reading, rather, fluency and rapid understanding are the most common objectives in readings and it is only when comprehension is impeded by unknown words, complex sentences, or very unfamiliar concept that skilled reader resort to decoding.
- 4. Comprehension stage:** In this stage, comprehension checks of various sorts are made to determine if students have achieved this reading purpose.
- 5. Transferable/Integrating Skill:** In this final stage of teaching reading, the exercises should be employed to help students go beyond the confines of the specific passage to enhance reading skills and effective reading strategies *per se*. Exercises that encourage contextual guessing, selective reading for main ideas and appropriate dictionary usage are among those suggested as especially helpful in this stage.

Finding and selecting sources for Arabic Reading Activities

The samples activities given in this section of the paper are drawn from a number of types of sources.

Textbook reading and realia: Teachers are advised to look at the authentic materials in their own course text to see how new and interaction activities can be designed to take full advantage of these often colourful and varied resources. In some cases, realia that have a great deal of potential for reading comprehension practice are found on the pages of the text, but few reading activities are given to accompany these materials.

Realia drawn from brochures, newspapers, magazines and other sources: Teachers may have access to a variety of printed authentic materials that they or colleagues have gathered on various trips to the target culture. This may include maps, circulars, tickets, travel brochures, and the like, many of which can be used to design classroom activities. A few of the activities in this section are based on this kind of material.

Photographs: Teachers who have taken photographs on their own trips abroad can use this creativity in designing classroom activities of various sorts. For example, students

can be asked to listen to a description of various activities that the teacher describes orally and select the appropriate photograph that accompanies the description from a set of four or five photos displayed on an overhead camera or in the front of the room. Alternatively, students can be given a set of photos taken by the teacher and asked to put them in chronological order as they read a short narrative that is instructor-written. Pictures can also be used to stimulate students' own written or oral production in the language, which can be shared with others in the class.

Web-based materials: When planning to use Web sites as a source of authentic materials for classroom exercises and activities, it is very beneficial to know how to locate specific information. Today an increasing number of course textbooks have accompanying Web sites that provide a variety of links to Internet sources keyed to topics in the chapters of the text. These materials can be an excellent starting point, and some textbook sites provide suggested activities to use as well. Teachers need not be limited, of course, to the links accompanying their course text's Web browser, such as Netscape or Internet Explorer, the user simply needs to type the name of one of several very powerful search engines to locate information, often in the target language. Some of the most well-known search engines are Excite, Lycos, Yahoo!, and AltaVista. These entire search engines are often cited in a variety of languages. The list of target language sites is normally found near the bottom of the opening page of the search engine site. You can begin your search by typing in English the major category in which you are looking for materials and/or information. Since the sites in other languages are very similar to the English site, by analogy you will have an idea of where-under which heading-to look. If you are looking for examples of housing (hotels, private homes, rentals, inns, etc., including photos and e-mail or Web addresses), begin by scanning the search engine site for logical headings-Tourism or Business and Economy. Then, it is nothing more than a simple click-and-search procedure to find a particular site that offers what you need.

Reading Strategies when Approaching any Arabic text

1. **Diagnosis: Teach students to self-report while reading.** Hosenfeld *et al* (1979) describe the self-report procedure as one in which students are encouraged to "think aloud" as they try to attach meaning to a second-language text. (For an extensive description of this procedure, see Hosenfeld 1979). As students report their thinking processes, the teacher has an opportunity to diagnose reading difficulties and identify specific reading strategies.

2. **Identify students' reading strategies:** Using a checklist of successful reading strategies (such as contextual) guessing, identification of grammatical categories of words,

recognition of cognates, use of cues from illustrations and glosses, and the like), the teacher records whether a given individual's use of such strategies is satisfactory, unsatisfactory, or nonexistent. This checklist then serves as a diagnostic tool in helping students improve their reading techniques.

3. Creation of Class Climate: Help students to understand the concept of strategy and to recognize that some strategies are successful, some unsuccessful, and others only moderately successful. In this step, Hosenfeld et al. suggest that teachers help students compare and contrast the various problem-solving strategies that they are using and identify those strategies that are most successful. One possibility is to ask several students to think aloud as they read a short paragraph. Class members then discuss the strategies used by these students and their effectiveness in understanding the discourse.

4. Introduction: Help students to identify successful strategies used when reading in their native language: Beginning with a cloze passage in the native language or with a passage containing nonsense words, students talk about ways in which they can identify the missing words or the meaning of the nonwords in the passage. Students' guessing strategies can be listed on the board for further discussion.

➤ **Help students identify successful strategies for reading text in the second language:** Using a type of activity similar to that described above, the teacher helps students identify decoding and word-solving strategies in the second language that parallel those they used in their native language.

➤ **Provide instruction and practice for specific reading strategies:** Instruction in contextual guessing and other successful reading strategies can be given with a variety of short texts so that students can see their wide applicability across reading tasks. Students can talk about their problem-solving strategies with several types of practice texts. They might work together on a series of cloze passages, use texts with new vocabulary that has been italicized but not glossed, or simply underline any words, expression, or sentences in a passage that they do not understand and share those problems with other class members. Students who have resolved those problems can explain how they arrived at their conclusions; several students can share problem-solving strategies that worked so that the group can see variety of techniques available to achieve comprehension.

➤ **Repeat Step 2: Identify students' reading strategies:** In this final step in the reading sequence, Hosenfeld et al. suggest that strategies be recorded again on the checklist and matched against those used before the reading instruction sequence began. However, caution must be taken against using this comparison as a basis for assigning a grade in reading, since

the interview procedure and the checklist are meant as diagnostic, rather than evaluative, tools for the improvement of reading strategies.

The exercises and teaching suggestions offered in this section are only a few of the many possible reading comprehension and development activities that can be used in a proficiency-oriented approach. For many more ideas and innovation formats for teaching reading in a second language, see Hosenfeld (1979), Hosenfeld et al. (1981), Grellet (1981), and Philips (1984).

Summary

In this work, we have explored various ways to teach more actively the receptive skills for listening and reading in Arabic classes. We have seen that both of these skills, though similar in some ways, involved somewhat different processes. In addition, the structures and types of discourse involved in listening and reading are quite different in nature. Comprehension is not a static concept to be assessed in the same fashion at all time; rather we should think of comprehension in terms of the purpose of the listening or reading activity, the types of text or input that is being processed, and the characteristics of reader themselves. The paper also suggests a pragmatic approach to reading instruction for students whose skills are somewhat more advanced. Arabic teachers using such plans should find that proficiency goals in listening and reading will be reached more easily and more rapidly by the Arabic students, and that the valuable skills students learn in their Arabic classes will transfer to other areas of curriculum.

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