



Challenges in Developing Reading Skills for Grade 1 ESL Learners in Oman

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ABSTRACT

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Surveying the quadrilateral challenges that Omani Grade 1 learners encounter as they emerge into English reading in an ESL context is the focus of this paper. This is to identify reading problems such as vocabulary deficiency, phoneme consciousness, and, indeed, the inability to distinguish in the texts the strains of the English language they have not encountered before. There are other factors related to social and education rather than language. Often, these students receive little positive reinforcement at home or in the community because Oman is not an English-speaking country and English is not spoken outside the classroom. Also, the practical approaches to teaching early reading in the second language might be consistent with methods other than traditional approaches to learning; this could pose a problem. This study focuses on the appropriateness of an ESL curriculum that will address the needs of Omani Grade 1 learners as well as the use of phonetic training, vocabulary development, and culturally sensitive learning resources in teaching. Its direction is to contribute information about its results to the development of educators and educational policymakers to establish a supportive learning environment. The proposed study will enhance English literacy among Omani learners to enhance a customised teaching-learning environment that addresses the linguistic and cultural context for learners to improve their sustainable success in learning English.

Keywords: *Cultural Influence on Learning; ESL Reading Challenges; Omani Grade 1 Learners; Phonological Awareness; Second Language Acquisition*

Background

The challenges that Arabic ESL students encounter in online learning environments primarily affect their spoken English proficiency, according to existing research (Nawi & Nor, 2023). Omani first graders encounter special obstacles during their English as a Second Language acquisition. The process of learning English reading demands these beginning students to adjust to unfamiliar linguistic elements, which include the alphabet and phonetic system with complex grammar structures, although their background language is Arabic. New language learning sets a difficult cognitive challenge for students who must use scripts distinct from their first language, according to Al-Issa (2020).

Research has documented these reading problems in ESL students specifically identifying phonetic confusion alongside minimal vocabulary knowledge and grammatical differences between Arabic and English, according to Imtiaz, Hassan & Akmal (2023). A review has emerged about the communicative teaching direction of the Omani English curriculum that focuses on meaningful and interactive language use, according to Liu & Reynolds (2024). The subject of ESL pedagogy for Arabic-speaking students focuses on specialised instructional approaches and regular resource availability since phonetic elements together with cultural elements directly affect reading abilities according to Imtiaz, Hassan & Akmal (2023). Evidence indicates that Grade 1 learners in Oman would benefit best through a combination of phonetic awareness training together with vocabulary development strategies allowing them to master complex English reading skills effectively.

Statement of the Problem

Although the Grade 1 ESL students in Oman are being taught English, the students, faced with a series of obstacles, have not developed reading skills effectively. These include the students' linguistic skills where vocabulary is poor, phonetics unknown and socio-cultural contexts are irrelevant (Vicari & Kirby, 2023). These problems have been investigated in earlier studies (Liu & Reynolds, 2024), yet the published research fails to consider how these problems are related to the organisation of the curriculum and the teaching of the focus on the young Arabic speakers. This gap brings in serious doubts regarding the present ESL practices with regard to the initial reading skills acquisition.

Gaps in the Literature: It should be stressed that although there are several studies describing the difficulties that the students of Arabic descent who are also ESL learners experience, there are very few references that look at first graders in Oman and how their knowledge of the Arabic language hinders reading in English. It also remains highly understudied how reading that includes content that would not be relevant to the students' culture affect their desire to read as well as understand the content. **Practical Significance:** An intervention would also assist in breaking the barrier by ensuring that reading instructions and phonics instructional practices that enhance vocabulary are aligned with the Arabic learners' context – thus improving literacy. There is also great need to customise curriculums to suit the cultural context of the learners. (Al-Sinani, 2023).

Research Objectives

To explore the main challenges encountered by Omani Grade 1 pupils in reading English.

- To analyse its effect on language differences.
- To examine the role of cultural background in reading comprehension.
- To investigate teaching practices that could reduce these barriers.

The research seeks to explore several key questions related to the reading development of Grade 1 ESL learners in Oman. Firstly, it aims to identify the main reading difficulties faced by these young learners.

Secondly, it investigates how cultural settings influence the reading retention and comprehension of Omani Grade 1 ESL students. Thirdly, the study examines the impact of linguistic differences between Arabic and English on these students' reading comprehension and retention. Lastly, it explores which instructional methods can be employed to enhance the reading abilities of these learners.

Literature Review

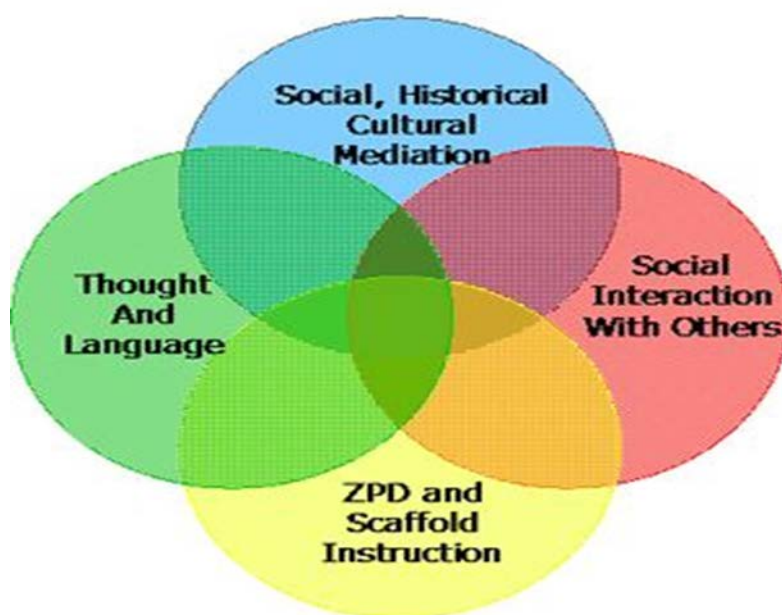
The literature review explores recent studies from 2019 to 2024 on the linguistic and cultural challenges faced by Omani ESL learners in reading English. Linguistic disparities between Arabic and English significantly hinder reading comprehension and decoding abilities. Arabic's non-linear, Semitic orthographic and morphological structure contrasts sharply with English's linear phonetic system, leading to difficulties with unfamiliar English sounds such as /p/ and /th/ (Al-Qahtani, 2020). Additionally, Arabic's verb-subject-object (VSO) syntax causes confusion when students read English's subject-verb-object (SVO) sentences (Al Shyiab *et al.*, 2023), and students with limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge struggle with sentence construction and meaning. Al-Habsi, Al-Busaidi & Al-Issa (2022) found that Omani ESL learners often develop English syntax slowly due to limited exposure outside the classroom.

Cultural differences also play a critical role in reading difficulties. Studies show that unfamiliar Western cultural references in texts cause disengagement and comprehension issues. Hossain (2024) found that students scored 30% higher when reading materials incorporated Gulf Arab cultural themes. Ahmed (2023) also highlighted students' struggles with foreign cultural content like Western holidays. The use of culturally relevant materials, such as augmented reality storybooks featuring Omani heritage, has been shown to improve engagement and comprehension (Abu Abeeleh, Al-Ghazo & Al-Sobh, 2021).

Effective instructional methods like systematic phonics instruction (Ahmed, 2023) and multimedia-based vocabulary teaching (Teng, 2023) enhance learning outcomes. Krüger's (2023) SLA framework underscores the significance of language exposure, quality input, and cultural relevance. He emphasises that outside-school, media-based English exposure can improve ESL learners' language acquisition by focusing on authentic, familiar content that enhances vocabulary, listening skills, and cultural understanding (Al-Sukaiti, 2023). Overall, the literature stresses the importance of linguistically and culturally responsive teaching to support Omani ESL learners' reading development (Lai & Mukundan, 2023).

The Input Hypothesis of Stephen Krashen, reading that learners progress as they work with texts slightly beyond their comprehension abilities in a natural setting ($i+1$ is related to the concept of 'meaningful exposure' in this framework. It is also supported by the sociocultural theory of development by Lev Vygotsky since, as Krüger follows, the significance of interactive communication to language acquisition. Students build understanding of SLA processes beyond scope and practice English communicative competence through peer and culture as means of interpreting what is said and how it is said. (Almohawes, 2024).

Putting Vygotsky's Theories Into Classroom Practice



Combining Thought and Language With Socialization – A Dynamic Process

Figure 1: Vygotsky's theory of classroom practice

Therefore, it can be concluded that Krüger's theoretical approach is based upon both the input-based and the interactional models of SLA. This is contrary to the notion familiar to educators that students should not use media and should avoid any cultural influences on upgrading language only in school conditions.

Methods

Data Collection and Participants Section

The study aims to collect qualitative data through teacher interviews, classroom activities, and student assessments to identify key reading difficulties among Grade 1 Omani ESL learners (Wutich, Beresford & Bernard, 2024). A sample of 10–15 students representing diverse socioeconomic and geographic regions will be selected, with final numbers determined by data saturation. As Lim (2024) notes, qualitative research prioritizes depth over participant quantity. Thematic analysis of the assessments reveals persistent challenges with reading vocabulary, largely due to students' limited opportunities to practice new words outside the classroom. This issue is further exacerbated by culturally irrelevant learning materials, which hinder student engagement and comprehension.

Results and Discussion

Vocabulary Challenges

The analysis of the reading assessments reported that there are visible vocabulary gaps among the Omani Grade 1 ESL learners. This problem affects their understanding as well as their participation since many of the learners encounter English vocabulary that is not relevant to their daily lives. The teachers noticed that such difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that students have limited contact with English outside the classroom since most learners are not sufficiently provided with opportunities to practise and consolidate target vocabulary (Al-Qahtani, 2023). Furthermore, studies highlight the necessity of

incorporating words from the sociocultural environment that are course objectives into the relevant vocabulary exercises since this enhances participation and understanding (Hossain, 2024).

Table 4.1 Vocabulary Challenges Encountered

Vocabulary Challenge	Percentage of Students Affected	Impact Observed in Reading	Teacher Observations
Limited Vocabulary Knowledge	70%	Low comprehension scores	Students have reading comprehension problems
Lack of Exposure to English	65%	Difficulty retaining words Even with the spelling of words	There is little practice, hence the poor retention
Culturally Irrelevant Content/ Out of Context materials	60%	Low engagement in lessons/ Lessons are not animated	Students are not interested in reading materials that are not related to their life
Trouble Freeing Words from Its Context	55%	Wrong text comprehension	Students do not understand what they are asked to understand when an unfamiliar word is used.

Phonetic Awareness and Pronunciation Issues

The most pressing difficulty was phonetic awareness relating to sounds like the English “th” and “p” that are absent in the Arabic language. These observations and interviews with teachers showed that these discrepancies lead to inaccurate decoding and pronunciation, which affects reading fluency. This study found teachers demanding phonics instruction specifically designed for Arabic speakers since existing programmes may not be effective in addressing such phonetic gaps (Al Qahtani, 2023).

Influence of Socio-Cultural Background on Reading

Lack of understanding is attributed to the lack of sociocultural background of Omani students. All respondents noted that for most of the material, there are references that they do not understand because they are outside their cultural realm of understanding, hence discouraging the students from continuing to read. Culturally incongruent reading materials decrease student engagement and hinder the students’ ability to relate to what they are reading (Al Malki, Al Rushaidi & Al Saidi, 2024). To share and increase interest, there have to be concerns with the contextual relevancy of what will be read by the students, as evidenced by the fact that when contextual references used were from western settings, the students became lost.

Table 4.2 Phonetic Awareness and Pronunciation Issues

Phonetic Issue	Percentage of Students Affected	Specific Sounds	Impact on Reading	Teacher Recommendations
Unable to Pronounce "th"	68%	“th,” “p,” “v” sounds	Slow rate of reading	Increase the amount of time spent on specific phonics exercises
Blends are difficult	60%	Blends like "sh" and "ch"	Fluency issues	Multisensory learning and phonics exercises
Vowel mispronunciation	55%	Short versus long vowels	Misunderstanding	Using audio resources and phonemic awareness games
Confusion with Consonants	45%	Hard vs. soft consonants	Inaccurate reading	Structured phonics and repetition exercises for inaccurate reading

Table 4.3 Influence of Socio-Cultural Background on Reading

Socio-Cultural Factor	Percentage of Students Affected	Example of Challenge	Impact on Learning	Suggested Adaptations
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Unfamiliar References to Western Culture	75%	References are to Western foods or holidays.	Poor comprehension and low engagement	Provide examples that are appropriate for the culture.
Unrelated Historical Backgrounds	60%	Books about historical events in the West	Failure to comprehend the background	Give examples from Arabic or Omani culture.
Insufficient Use of Localized Vocabulary	55%	Words unrelated to the surroundings of the students	disappointment and demotivation	Include well-known terms
Lack of consistency with Everyday Experiences	50%	Stories of unusual activities in Oman	Low motivation to engage	Include relatable settings and activities.

Summary of Key Findings

Three main themes influencing the early development of English reading skills among Omani Grade 1 ESL learners were identified through thematic analysis: Those failures of cultural transfer, phonic awareness difficulties, and insufficient word knowledge were the four main predictors of failure to learn English reading for Omani students in Grade 1. These results suggest that the Omani learner constraint can be well addressed by implementing an appropriate curriculum and teaching methodology that is compatible with the linguistic and cultural environment of Oman. In short, the development of enhanced dictionary schemes, phonics and gender-sensitive materials may shape the environment that will encourage the students to develop early English literacy and will form the basis for learning in the subsequent ESL classes (Chinnathambi, *et al.*, 2023).

Long-Term Academic Impact of Early ESL Interventions

The findings suggest that early interventions in phonetic awareness, vocabulary development, and culturally relevant reading materials play a critical role in shaping ESL learners' long-term academic success. Research indicates that students who develop strong foundational literacy skills in early grades are more likely to achieve higher reading comprehension and fluency in later educational stages (Almelhes, 2024). By addressing phonetic challenges early, students can build confidence in reading, reducing future learning gaps that may hinder academic progression (Al-Kinany, Al-Abri & Ambusaidi, 2022).

Additionally, the integration of culturally adapted learning materials helps sustain engagement and motivation, preventing reading anxiety and disengagement commonly observed among ESL learners exposed to unfamiliar contexts (Hossain, 2024). These findings highlight the importance of curriculum reforms that prioritise early phonics instruction and contextualised vocabulary learning to ensure long-term literacy retention. At a broader level, structured ESL interventions can contribute to higher national literacy rates and support education policy development in Oman, aligning with the country's goals of enhancing English proficiency across all academic levels (Al-Qahtani, 2020).

Conclusion

This research is significant for English education in Oman as it addresses key reading challenges faced by young ESL learners, particularly those stemming from differences between Arabic and English. By identifying these early difficulties, the study aims to inform the development of culturally relevant and effective instructional methods. The findings can guide targeted interventions to improve reading comprehension, fluency, and accuracy, aligning with national education goals. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of early reading support, as foundational literacy skills are crucial for long-term academic success, especially given existing struggles with language at higher educational levels. The analysis demonstrates the importance of implementing context-based solutions which address the linguistic differences between Arabic and English and cultural differences. The lack of research on ESL

pedagogy in Oman exists despite growing knowledge in this field, and standardised approaches tend to ignore dialectal and sociocultural specifics of the region. Studies should focus on conducting extended mixed-method investigations to assess custom-made interventions that remain consistent with Omani educational guidelines and Arabic literary principles. Students in Grade 1 should receive phonics training based on their needs while using materials adapted to their culture to build reading fluency, which prevents learners from dropping out of ESL education later on. The implementation of systematic phonics interventions in Oman has the potential to boost national literacy.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: Quantitative data collection emphasizes ethics by securing informed consent, clarifying study details, safeguarding participant privacy, maintaining confidentiality, and protecting personal information from unauthorized access.

Conflicts of Interest: The author proclaims no conflict of interest.

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