

## Investigating the Omani EFL Learners' English Reading Habit and its Impacts on other Macro-skills

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**Abstract:** Among the four macro skills of English, Reading deserves sacrosanct consideration and greater weight as it is a building block, though not a cornerstone, in the process of acquiring a Second Language. Apart from concretising the vocabulary and grammatical components that students learn in classrooms, Reading provides them the necessary schematic knowledge for better comprehension and effective writing skills, unique aesthetic pleasure and a vast repertoire of active as well as passive vocabulary. The present paper centres around the findings of an empirical study on the Omani EFL learners' reading habits in English, source of (de)motivation for them to read, their attitude to study or leisure reading and how this leaves destructive impacts on their acquisition of other macro/micro-skills, particularly writing. A few remedial measures to tackle the issue and its educational implications are also dealt with.

**Keywords:** leisure reading, study reading, macro skills, intrinsic or extrinsic motivation and SLA

### INTRODUCTION

It is a felt fact to teachers and educators in the Omani ELT scenario that their students' intrinsic motivation to read in English is far below the expected level and consequently they develop a very poor reading habit which has explicit repercussions on the acquisition or mastery of the other macro and micro-skills, like listening, speaking, writing, vocabulary and spelling.

Even after studying English in schools for more than nine or ten years, many learners struggle hard to communicate their feelings or express their ideas properly when any writing and speaking task is given. Of all the language skills, writing accurate and acceptable sentences seems to be the most daunting task for many learners when they are made to do it either in classrooms or in exams. Their ability to discriminate between the present and past tenses, often in narrative writings, obstructs reader's or listener's understanding of the text or discourse in the intended way. Most students often show rampant verbal errors or misspellings that are tantamount to spelling disability in their free writing tasks

Studies on Gulf societies [1] show that there is a lack of a reading culture or reading habit because of the prized oral tradition in these societies. This absence of reading culture in Omani students leads to the lack of background knowledge, which is critical to comprehension of reading and development of writing. Moreover, they look upon reading as an arid chore to obtain grades for promotion in a course. Many EFL

studies [2, 3] have shown how the language skills are interrelated and mastery of one skill productively influences the acquisition of other skills. The casual exposure to words and structures in print introduces learners to new language inputs and reinforces the language inputs they have acquired and extensive reading concretizes them. Thus, pleasure or leisure reading, unlike study reading, provides enough opportunities to acquire or fossilise significant amount of language inputs without a feeling of learning or being taught grammar, vocabulary or discourse. It is, therefore, worth delving deep into the interrelationship between the Omani EFL learners' language skills, especially Reading and Writing.

The present paper centres around findings of an empirical study on the Omani EFL learners' reading habits in English, source of (de)motivation for them to read, their attitude to study/leisure reading and how this leaves destructive impacts on their acquisition of other macro/micro-skills, particularly writing. The study also makes inquisitive glances into theories underpinning interrelations between or among the four skills in

English along with investigating the factors accountable for poor reading habit in English. The paper also proposes prospective solutions, to be implemented at primary/secondary/higher levels of learning English in the country, to remedy this ELT concern and to make language education effective and outcome-oriented. The possibilities of mitigating EFL learners' problematic areas in English, by judiciously giving greater emphasis to one of the closely intertwined language skills, are also discussed.

### Reading and Writing skills

Among the four macro skills of English, Reading deserves sacrosanct consideration and greater weight as it is a building block, though not a cornerstone, in the process of a second language acquisition. Till 1970s, Reading and Writing were conceptualized as separate but related language skills. The former is said to be the key input skill to provide with the vocabulary, syntax, schematic knowledge, thinking and other high order skills, and collocational or colligational awareness which are critical to writing skills. The linguistic, cognitive and aesthetic benefits of reading, can be illustrated as follows.



Fig-1: Various Benefits of Reading

Studies on Reading as a skill underwent many evolutionary stages and it first focused on method, then, on content, and later, on meaning construction. Researches to reading and writing took a paradigm shift with the advent of constructivist theories because it started to consider writing and reading as meaning-making activities [4]. The exponents of constructivism argued that when people write and read, meaning is continually in a state of becoming. The mind anticipates, reverts, and constructs temporary impressions that frequently change and grow as meaning is finally being evolved/derived [5]. Language, syntax, and structure are all at play as texts-in-the-head and texts-on-paper develop. Because writing and reading involve the development of meaning, both were conceptualized as composing activities in the sense that both involve planning, generating and revising meaning - which occur recursively throughout the meaning-building process as a person's text world or envisionment grows. Based on this observation, researchers like Graves & Hansen [6] and Nuttall, [7] perceived the writer as a reader and vice versa.

If Writing can be deemed as an act of transferring knowledge in print, reading can be looked upon as a key for it. To phrase it another way, reading is the crucial key to open door to the vast repertoire of a

language spread across vocabulary, grammar, sentence structures etc. Grellet [8] in his research on the interrelationship between reading and writing skills, reported that students who wrote well also read well, and that the converse was true. Wallace [9] also observed that better readers are better writers.

In 1983, Stotsky[12] in her studies examined the mutual correlation between reading and writing and showed that "better writers tend to be better readers (of their own writing as well as of other reading material), that better writers tend to read more than poorer writers, and that better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers" (p. 636). Langer [5] undertook another study in which learners were provided with additional reading materials and experiences in place of explicit grammar instruction or extra practice for writing skills and found that these experiences were as beneficial as, or more beneficial than, pure/rule-bound grammar study or extra writing practice. In fact, providing children with opportunities to read different genres of writing helps them in getting exposed to a variety of structures which they, in turn, internalize as a part of their competence in the Target Language (TL).

To sum up, studies have accentuated [10, 11] that Reading and Writing are more highly related and mutually supportive or composing processes than as isolated skills and behaviors, and they can reciprocally impact, reinforce and enrich the development of each other, and also of thinking skills. Writers are conspicuously influenced by what they have learned about language, structure and style from the texts they have read. They also tend to build upon, to a considerable extent, the ideas that they came across in their reading while generating and synthesizing ideas for writing. Not only does reading help learners of a language be effective writers but also good and efficient readers because there is a supportive, interactive and give and take relationship between reading and writing processes. So, being a good writer without being a good reader is a nearly impossible proposition in the context of learning a language.

## THE STUDY

### Procedure and Respondents

The necessary data for the study was collected by administering a questionnaire developed by the researchers and properly validated, to one hundred students of the Foundation Program at an Omani university. The questionnaire consisted of two parts, a section about background details of the respondents and another on various aspects related to their reading habits. The 19 questions in the second section were designed in such a way that they could measure the respondents' source of (de)motivation for reading in English, reading

preferences, amount of time spent on reading and general attitude to reading in English. The data was further authenticated with the help of structured/unstructured interviews with experienced teachers in the Omani ELT context.

### Objectives

The major objectives of the study were to find out the overall nature of the Omani EFL students' reading habits in English. They can be specifically listed as:

- The nature of Omani EFL students' reading habit in English
- The source of their (de)motivation to read in English
- The length of time they spend for Study Reading and Leisure Reading respectively.
- Their attitude to reading in English.
- Their reading preferences

The study was based on the hypothesis that Omani EFL learners have little intrinsic motivation to read in English and it has negative impacts on the acquisition of other macro-skills, explicitly on writing.

### DATA ANALYSIS

One of the main purposes of the study was to ascertain the time spent by Omani EFL learners for reading in English and how much time they set aside for reading from their leisure hours a day. The questions in the second part of the questionnaire can be grouped into a few major heads as detailed below.

**Table -1 : Leisure Time spent**

Description	Percentage %
Play games	12%
Sleep	25%
Browse the internet	27%
Watch T.V.	27%
Reading	9%

Questions in Table 1 were intended to measure how students spent their leisure time. The results show a good majority of students like watching T.V or browsing the internet. About 25% percent prefer sleeping during their leisure times and 12% percent

playing games. It is relevant to note that reading gets least weight (9%) as a leisure time activity. Hence, it is to be assumed that the motivation for reading during free time is marginal while comparing with other activities.

**Table -2 : Extrinsic Motivation for reading**

Description	Percentage %
Do your parents encourage you to read books in English?	71%
Do your teachers ask you to read English books other than the texts prescribed for the course?	85%
Do you think your reading habits in English help you develop other skills like speaking, spelling and vocabulary?	86%
Do you think your reading habit has direct influence on your writing skill?	89%

Table 2 includes four questions for measuring the extrinsic motivation for reading and tries to uncover how parents and teachers encourage their wards to read in English. Majority of the parents (71%) and teachers (85%) advise their children/students to read general English books. The overall results from the data show

that students are extrinsically well-motivated to read English books and they themselves are convinced of the fact that reading is very central to developing other related skills in English. The poor weight given to leisure reading is not due to extrinsic motivation but factors which are intrinsic and culturally rooted.

**Table -3: Nature of Reading**

Description	Percentage %
Enjoy reading both Arabic and English books	55%
Only reading English books	25%
Only Arabic books	28%
Reading is not an enjoyment	11%

Table 3 has four questions on the nature of reading English books. The biggest percentage of the respondents (55%) indicates that they enjoy reading both in Arabic and English. Though Students agree reading habits help them in improving their reading and writing skills, in reality they have very poor reading

habits. The results show students have poor reading habits both in their first language (28%) and English (25%). Overall, the data analysis underlines that in spite of their ability to enjoy reading, they don't prefer reading as a pastime activity. The number of students who don't find reading as an enjoyment is 11%.

**Table-4: Time spent in a day for reading English books**

Description	Percentage %
More than 4 hours	1%
Between 3-4 hours	2%
Between 2-1 hours	32%
Less than 1 hour	29%
Don't read often	14%
Rarely read	22%

The six questions in Table 4 illustrate the time spent by students in a day for reading English books. The percentage of students who read less than two hours a day is 61% and 36% of the students does not indulge in any kind of reading. The results substantiate only 1 in 100 read for more than four hours a day. It's

quite obvious that only (3%) of the students spend longer time in reading English books. It is significant to note that this negligible importance given to reading by students is contrary to their conviction that reading is very crucial for language acquisition and their greater level of extrinsic motivation to read in English.

**Table -5: Preferred English reading book types**

Description	Percentage %
Only my prescribed textbooks	20%
Magazines	18%
Newspapers	17%
Stories	28%
Novels	9%
Poems	6%
None of the above	2%

Table 5 with seven questions on the type of English books that are read depicts the students' preferred genres in reading. Results imply 17% of the students likes to read newspapers, 9% novels, 28%

storybooks, and 18% magazines. A good percentage (20%.) of students like to read only the prescribed course books.

**Table-6 : English books read apart from textbooks in a Month**

Description	Percentage %
No book	59%
Between 2 and 3	29%
Between 3 and 5	6%
More than 5	6%

Table 6 answers questions on the number of English books read in a month. The results show most of the students do not read at all (59%). About 29 percent of the students reads between two or three books and only a cumulative twelve percent reads three or above three books. In conclusion, it's apparent that

the students are not very much keen on reading books other than their course books for study and this attitude to leisure reading in English by the Omani EFL learners can be taken as a valid reason for their poor skills in writing.

**Table -7 : Purpose for reading English books**

Description	Percentage %
Pleasure	8%
Doing homework	32%
Improving English skills	40%
Spending free time	20%

Table 7 induces four questions on the purpose for reading English books. The results substantiate the previous outcome and show a very low percentage of students who read for pleasure. The main purpose for reading in English is to do their homework and to improve their language skills, but reading is confined to their prescribed course books and it is exam oriented.

The respondents have positive belief that reading English books could improve their English skills but they fail to derive the aesthetic pleasure that reading is said to offer endlessly. To sum up, most of the EFL students do not consider reading as their pleasure time activity.

**Table -8 : Motivation to read English books**

Description	Percentage %
Parents provide many English books	19%
Teachers support reading	29%
Reading is a pastime activity	13%
To pass the course	30%
Zero motivation to read English	9%

Table 8 introduces five questions for assessing the EFL learners' motivation to read English books. Majority of the students (30) are motivated to read English books for fetching pass marks in their studies. Hence, reading is highly exam focused and syllabus bound. They agree that (29%) heir teachers support

their reading and parents provide them with books for reading. Only (13%) percent of the students looks at reading as a for pastime activity. This means that teachers and parents do support the students but their intrinsic motivation to spend time for leisure reading is drastically low.

**Table-9 : Factors affecting /demotivating reading habit**

Description	Percentage %
No time to read	16%
Do not understand ideas	16%
Reading is boring	30%
Reading is difficult due to unfamiliar words	38%

Table 9 analyzes the factors affecting reading habits in students with four major questions. Results indicate only 16% of the students say that they do not have time to read. A majority of the students (68%) do not indulge in reading since they feel it is too boring or

they do not understand what is being read. A major share of students again thinks reading is difficult due to unfamiliar words in English. In conclusion, the key factors which affect or put off them from reading are reading is boring and reading is difficult because of

unfamiliar words. The result, on the one hand, indicates that vocabulary power of the learners stand on their way understanding of what is being read. On the other hand,

the poor vocabulary implies that their reading habit is not up to the mark because voracious reading significantly adds to one's vocabulary strength.

**Table-10: Average time spent on study reading in a day**

Description	Percentage %
Less than 30 minutes	25%
Less than 1 hour	43%
Between 1 and 2 hours	23%
More than 3 hours	9%

Table 10 is wholly dissimilar from other tables as these particular data are meant to measure the respondents' reading habits exclusively related to their studies, not for their pleasure reading. Apparently 25% of the respondents spends less than 30 minutes and (23 %) spends between 1 and 2 hours on study reading in a day. Hence, most of the respondents (43%) state that their average time on study reading in a day is less than one hour. So, putting together (91%) of the respondents spend less than 3 hours for their study reading.

**MAJOR FINDINGS**

The analysis of the data indicates that only a very few Omani EFL learners are interested in leisure reading in English in spite of the fact that they are extrinsically motivated to read by their parents and teachers. The major findings of the study can be summarised as follows:

- The Omani EFL Learners are extrinsically motivated to read by parents, teachers, examinations.
- They are well aware of the fact that reading has direct constructive impact on other macro skills.
- They are diffident about their writing skills in English.
- Most of the learners don't enjoy/like reading in English.
- They are least interested in leisure reading.
- The main source of de-motivation for them to read in English is difficult/unfamiliar vocabulary and the resultant inability to comprehend the ideas conveyed.
- Students who are good at reading are more confident about their writing skills

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Since the study throws a flood of light on the status of Omani EFL learners reading habit and reading preferences in English, the researchers like to put forward the following recommendations to inculcate better reading habits and positive attitude to reading in English.

- A reading culture should be inculcated in students, right from the early years of education.
- Include compulsory extra reading material/ books and a recommended reading list in all English courses.
- Introduce library hours/reading day.
- Provide opportunities for wider interaction and use of TL in and out of the classroom.
- Introduce projects that will necessitate them to read books other than their text books.
- Incorporate activities in which students will have to read and answer questions based on what they have read.
- Constitute awards/appreciation for best readers in each class
- Provide a list of important books that a student should read as part of leisure reading by the end of a course and assign credit for that in the curriculum
- Introduce class-wise sessions like book review / my favourite book /my best author in which students share their experiences of reading.

**Educational Implications**

In a second language educational environment, teaching vocabulary has to be contextualised and drilled further as learners tend to forget most of the words they learned/learn. The chances for frequent encounter or use of the words they learned by way of reading or speaking are sparse, so the fossilisation of words rarely happens. This leads to poor range of passive vocabulary which is very much instrumental for reading. Therefore, reading habit is a must for better acquisition and mastery of skills in the target language and there must be systematically planned and effectively executed strategies to promote reading habits in English for Omani ESL learners.

The Omani EFL learners' other skills in English are adversely affected by their poor wealth of active/passive vocabulary, the words taught in reading classes have to be dexterously incorporated to speaking/writing /listening classes. The length of time that learners spend for leisure reading is remarkably less, so students need scaffolding to a level where they

are able to derive the unique aesthetic pleasure that only the reading skill is able to provide. The learners have to be provided with choices in what they read and write, opportunities to write and read about topics and ideas that interest them and with which they are familiar in order to ensure greater levels of learner motivation and participation in reading/writing tasks.

## CONCLUSION

In short, reading is the cornerstone to build a strong foundation for any second language acquisition as it plays vital roles in fossilizing words learned, in providing the schematic knowledge to understand what is being read and to widen the horizon of learners' active and passive vocabulary in any second/foreign language. Moreover, reading is very crucial for academic success and for comprehensive and reliable mastery over all the skills in a language. Poor reading habit in English not only cripples other related language skills but also destructively obstructs learners' thinking, cognitive, reasoning skills. Therefore, Omani EFL learner's poor level of intrinsic motivation to read in English has to be seriously addressed and appropriate remedial measures be taken to ensure maximum efficacy of the big budget being spent on English education in the country and to assure expected learning outcome and learner competence in English.

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