

Important Beliefs and Practices

In Teaching Reading in Egyptian Secondary Schools

In Egypt, modern education dates back to the beginning of the 19th century when Mohammed Ali ruled Egypt in 1805.

Parallel to this modern education was religious education represented by Al- Azhar . Since then, pre-university education has gone through several stages.

Currently, it comprises the following:

- Elementary school (5 years).
- Jounior High (3 years).
- Senior High (3 years)

The Subject-matter curriculum prevails in Egyptian schools, wher a number of separate subjects are taught . From among these subjects the mother tongue (Arabic) constitutes 53%, 26%, and 18% of the total school time at the elementary, Junior High and Senior High stages, respectively.

The Arabic language is presented in the form of separate subjects particularly at both the Junior and Senior school levels . It is divided into grammar, morphology, rhetoric, dictation, hand-writing, oral and written expression, reading and literature.

However, it is to be noted that there is some kin of integration among these subcomponents (branches) at the elementary stage.

A closer look at reading instruction at the various stages of general education in Egypt reveals the following :

Out of the total time devoted to the mother tongue reading instruction constitutes 80% at the elementary stage, 32% at Junior High and 33% at Senior High.

The concept of reading had gone through two stages . The first stage during the 1st half of this century, concentrated on identification and pronunciation . Hence, oral reading was highlighted.

The second stage focused on comprehension and analysis as a result of the influence of Egyptians who studied in Europe and the U .S . in the second half of this century.

Likewise, there was a development in reading methods that coincided with the change in the concept of reading, namely, the change from the phonics method to the whole-word method.

Anyway, the aims of reading instruction at the Egyptian High School attempts to enable students to:

- 1- Comprehend what they read.
- 2- Skim articles, newspapers, Etc.
- 3- Read between the lines.
- 4- Infer from what they are reading.
- 5- Distinguish between main ideas and supporting details.
- 6- Appreciate what they read.
- 7- Follow instructions included in reading passages.
- 8- Form their own opinions about what they read.

Reading instruction at this stage depends on what is called “basal reading”, which comprises the following:

- 1- A book with various reading passages.
- 2- A book with only one literary genre, i .e ., a novel, a play, a critique etc.

Evaluation of reading instruction occurs at the end of the first and second semesters, utilizing tests that measure the students ability to do the following:

- 1- Explaining the meaning of vocabulary items.
- 2- Comprehending grammatical and metaphoric patterns.
- 3- Comprehending general ideas and supporting details.
- 4- Finding out word inflections.
- 5- Eliciting information.

Textbooks are uniform for all students (males / females), and for all environments (rural, urban, bedouin) . Some of the content of these books might not be suitable for students' interests or related to students' environments.

Many conferences have been held on reading instructions in Egypt . The convention held in 1986 was important.

I submitted a number of suggestions related to developing reading instruction at the High School level which will be mentioned later.

Comparing what is happening in Egypt and what specialists recommend, it is obvious that reading instruction at the Egyptian High School is in need of new ideas, i . e . , reconsideration.

Scholars have pointed out that reading instruction goes through five stages : reading readiness, beginning reading instruction, developing basic skills, extensive reading, and developing and maintaining reading habits.

Theses stages are generally covered during Junior High School, then students start to concentrate on reading for study purposes, on free unlimited reading in the Senior High School.

The situation in Egypt is as follows;

Reading instruction continues all through the Senior High School in a traditional boring manner, i . e . , beginning with a few questions on the topic posed by the teacher, students read silently . A general or a detailed discussion is followed then by loud reading . It is to be stressed that students read loudly and in turn.

The reading period is considered very boring and unchallenging, since most of the material is below students' level . The focus of this period is on information which students can assimilate by themselves without a teacher . Moreover, in so far as the methods of instruction or the content are concerned, there is nothing new . Therefore, students often do not attend this period as it is not binding or continuous . It is worthy of mention that any reading textbook does not exceed a hundred pages to be taught all through the academic year.

This is so scant compared to the limitless quantity of publications produced every day.

In addition to the above, there is no practice on speed reading despite its importance, or on training students to develop and improve their loud reading . Students also are not used to reading for study purposes.

Hence, one can safely say that real objective of reading instruction at the Egyptian High School stage is to enrich students' knowledge and to develop their vocabulary . Criticism or creativity has no place in reading instruction except for what is done by some enthusiastic teachers.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present a proposal for reading instruction at the Egyptian High School . This suggestion would attempt to avoid the educational objectives that were stated by reading instruction experts at the High School level and to underscore the attempts made at deepening the concept of reading and widening its horizon.

In addition to the above, this new proposal tries to strike a balance between oral and silent reading, and reading fro entertainment and reading for study purposes, special attention should be given to free reading and to students' interests . This proposal would save a lot of money spent on writing and publishing basal reading texts, besides catering for students interests and choices and meeting the requirements of various environments.

The Proposed Program:

The secondary stage (High School) has an important role in the educational ladder and in preparing the individual for life outside the school . This role is centered on tapping the students' potentialities and making the utmost use of them by preparing them either for academic studies at the universities or for wok, with all its responsibilities.

It goes without saying that preparing students for both fields (academia and work) requires various skills and competencies, from which reading stands as one of the most important skills.

Hence, reading should be given emphasis and efforts should be geared towards mastering its sub skills so that all students would be able to read efficiently.

It is a well-known fact that the more societies become advanced and complicated, the more reading becomes indispensable to individuals . This is reflected in the importance of reading for using and maintaining sophisticated equipment . Hence, the emphasis laid on the concept of basic education, and increasing compulsory age, is reflected in advanced countries by providing educational offerings till the High School level . Despite the increase in mass media such as radio, T .V ., movies, reading will always remain the principal tool for personal and social development, and for cognitive, affective and practical reasons . One can read at will, anything, anywhere, anytime without any restrictions.

When the Soviet Union launched its first satellite “Sputnik” in 1957, the United states looked carefully into its educational system . It came as no surprise that the U .S . realized that one of the factors, if not the main, of its failure to compete with Russia at that time was the unsuccessful attempts of the reading instructor in developing students’ interests, research abilities and creativity . To upgrade students’ reading skills, the U .S . devoted the seventies for realizing the right of every child to be a good reader.

A closer look at reading instruction in the High School in Arab countries reveals that it does not go beyond the Junior High School . Prescribed textbooks comprise one text with varied reading topics and another dealing with one topic.

Reading in both stages is the same . It is rarely that one can find a teacher who can differentiate between the techniques used in both stages, as they are almost the same . Hence, most High School students avoid the reading classes not because they believe they are

unimportant, but because of the way they are presented to them . Students' disinterest in reading stems also from the topics presented as these topics do not arouse students' interests, challenge them or even present new topics . It is to be noted that students, at this level, can read these topics without the help of their teacher.

There for, there are important demands on the secondary reading instructor other than listening to his students' reading aloud or looking at them when they read silently . Hence, there is a need to address the question : What can the secondary reading instructor present to his students?

To attempt an answer to the above question, it is pertinent to deal with a) The nature of the reading process and its stages, b) objectives of teaching reading at the High School level (secondary stage), and c) the procedures and processes that can effectively achieve the nature and objectives of reading.

The Nature of Reading:

According to Strevens (1978), reading is a complex activity that consists of making out the meaning of written language . He goes on to explain that the reader carries out two processes depending on his proficiency . The first is "deciphering" which is done by beginners and is a type of pattern - recognition . The second is "decoding" which is part of the total comprehension process and entails linking what is read to the reader's knowledge of both the language and the world, i . e ., his personal experience.

This means that the reading process is a very active one, requires various levels of comprehension.

Generally speaking, reading comprehension has two dimensions : a horizontal dimension and a vertical one . The former deals with understanding the word, the sentence, the paragraph, the topic and the gist (general idea) and the details.

On the other hand, the latter dimension deals with the various levels of comprehension, namely, literal meaning, implied meaning,

reading between the lines, inference, criticism, appreciation, interaction and creativity.

The main features or characteristics of reading at the secondary stage are the following:

1- Broad and deep reading in various fields, and mastering the skills of inference, problem solving critical reading, interaction and appreciation .

2- Mastering study skills, i .e, identifying needed information, basic references, and using them appropriately, skimming, note taking, and summarizing . These relate to the use of libraries, encyclopedias and dictionaries.

3- Speed silent reading in order to cope with the amount of information issued daily in newspapers and periodicals .

4- Accurate loud reading, expressing the situations properly . This requires mastery of the following sub-skills:

a- Accuracy in pronouncing words.

b- Accuracy of information.

c- Using gestures etc.

5- Independent free reading.

It is worth stating that Gray (1976) mentions that reading undergoes five stages : reading readiness, beginning reading, developing basic reading skills, extensive reading, and finally consolidating the basic skills.

The first four stages are closely related to reading instruction at the elementary stage, while the fifth at the Junior and Senior stages . This means, in Gray's viewpoint, that the Senior High makes use of and consolidates all the reading skills the students have previously mastered.

According to Edna Wignell (1977) viewpoint, there are four basic stages for reading instruction:

1- Reading readiness.

2- Forming basic reading skills.

3- First independent stage (reinforcing basic skills).

4- Second independent stage (ideal, accurate use of basic skills).

This corresponds to reading instruction at the High School level, requiring more emphasis on:

- implied meaning, inference and evaluation.
- Identifying references and basic sources, and making use of them.
- Study skills such as summarizing, skimming, speed reading

Etc.

- Developing and enriching vocabulary.

The question that is posed here is the following:

Can reading texts realize these objectives? These are centered on:

- broad and deep reading.
- Mastering study skills.
- Speed silent reading.
- Accurate loud reading.
- Independence in reading.

That teachers ask students to read a topic silently and answer some questions will neither achieve the above mentioned objectives nor upgrade students intellectual or linguistic standards.

It is to be noted that the recent trends in reading instruction at the secondary level, gleaned from international literature emphasize providing opportunities for students to read what they want according to specific program that comprises all objectives mentioned previously.

The most important features of this trend in secondary reading instruction are as follows:

- 1- No assigning of a reading textbook.
- 2- Varying the sources of reading, i .e ., newspapers, magazines, old books, new ones Etc...
- 3- Using public and school libraries.
- 4- Writing reports on what they have read.
- 5- Free reading.
- 6- Evaluation of students reading is multi-faceted, depending on :

- a- reports on various books.
- b- Summaries.
- c- Standardized tests.
- d- Use of the library.
- e- Loud reading inside the classroom.
- f- Evaluating new books.

This trend achieves many objectives simultaneously . For most among these are the following:

- Achieving reading objectives at the High School level.
- Realizing the development of reading skills.
- Developing interest in reading.
- Relating students reading to current events.
- Relating students to their heritage.
- Achieving many language activities.
- Alleviating the load on teachers.
- Developing creative reading.
- Developing critical reading.
- Catering for individual differences so as to satisfy various students' interests.
- Allowing for interaction among students.

It is to be stressed that when we call for allowing students to read according to their interests we do not advise that the teacher is deprived from performing his role in guiding his students, on the contrary, the reading instructor has to guide and convince his students to read topics other than the ones they are interested in, or to what he considers useful, or important as recommended in reading studies . This does not also mean assigning a certain textbook by a certain writer, since our aim is not rationalizing expenditure in as much as providing the utmost development of reading at this important stage.

To wind up this discussion, the following questions need answers:

Participants views are really welcome:

- 1- What are the procedures (techniques) most effective in reading

instruction at the High School level, in case of not assigning a reading textbook?

- 2- How can students be evaluated?
- 3- What are the suggested domains for reading? From the heritage, modern? What type of references and encyclopedias? What's the role of daily newspapers? Weekly magazines? Literary magazines ... etc.
- 4- Can we assign one reading domain for each grade? What's the role of the reading instructors?

We know in advance that there are obstacles impeding the implementation of this trend . Nevertheless we try once, twice, trice so that we can meet he requirements of the era in which we live, otherwise ...

* * *