

Adapting Reads to Evaluate the Reading Proficiency of Undergraduates in Saudi Arabia

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Reading is considered both a complex and a difficult skill compared to listening, speaking, and writing; since reading is the skill that links the other skills. Reading is not simply about recognising words, but it is also about understanding the message coded in written texts. Evaluating reading becomes essential in learning English. The READS or Reading Evaluation and Decoding System was developed and used by Universiti Sains Malaysia to diagnose and assess English reading proficiency among new students entering the university. Apparently, the original READS was designed based on the Malaysian school curriculum and evidently has an encoder that was based on the Malaysian culture. Therefore, a significant degree of contextual biases may exist in the encoder. This study aims to make the necessary adaptations so that the updated READS can be more suitable for use in Saudi Arabia and subsequently, evaluate the reading comprehension of the undergraduates. The adapted READS was evaluated by experts in Saudi Arabia and the results show that the adapted READS is effective in evaluating the Saudi undergraduates reading proficiency.

Key words: *READS, Reading, Proficiency, Saudi Arabia.*

Introduction

The education system in Saudi Arabia has transformed immensely since its inception in 1925. Saudi Arabia's government understands the importance of education, as reflected in the government's yearly budget. For example, in 2013, the amount allocated for education was 25 per cent of the total budget (Ministry of Finance, 2013). The education system in Saudi Arabia is centrally administered and managed by two agencies, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education (ur Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Even though the agencies



are separate with different operational roles, they complement each other to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of the Saudi Arabian education system.

For a variety of historical, social, cultural, and economic reasons, English holds a special place within the Saudi community. English is the principal (and in some cases, only) medium of communication in a wide range of social, administrative, educational, and professional domains. English is indeed the lingua franca used for communication between Saudis and the rather large cohort of foreign workers, widely engaged in the Saudi economy. In essence, an advanced English competence has become an indispensable component of most professional and administrative establishments. In addition, English has firmly established itself as the international language of science and technology, as well as the language of the internet and virtual communications (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015).

English is the only foreign language taught in Saudi Arabian schools. According to Al-Shammary (1984), initially, the English language was taught only in intermediate and secondary schools as a compulsory subject. The government of Saudi Arabia was against teaching English in elementary schools, because of the belief that learning English may affect a student's learning of Arabic. However, because of the importance of English, the education system evolved in 2010, and English is now taught in the lower levels of schooling as well (starting from the fourth grade of elementary school, when students are 10 years old). In the Department of Curriculum Design, the Ministry of Education presented the English syllabus considering the beliefs, customs, values and traditions of Saudi Arabian society. The English subject textbooks are commonly referred to as English for Saudi Arabia, and the grade-level textbooks are the same throughout the kingdom (Almutairi, 2008).

In public education, from elementary to secondary, the majority of English teachers are Saudis. The minimum qualification for teachers to teach English in schools is a bachelor's degree in English, but no previous training or experience is required (Alfahadi, 2014). A majority of the teachers graduated from the school of education or art at local Saudi universities and colleges that offer a four-year bachelor's degree in teaching English as a foreign language. The Ministry of Education has stated the general objectives of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the schools of Saudi Arabia (Al Zayid, 2012; ur Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015).

In higher education, most Saudi universities use English as the language of instruction in certain scientific courses, such as medicine and engineering (as English is essential and the language of these domains), while Arabic is used in non-scientific courses (e.g., courses of humanities). However, other courses, in which English is not the language of instruction, require students to complete EFL coursework as an additional compulsory unit (Alrashidi &

Phan, 2015). The additional English unit is intended to improve students' competence in English and enable them to use the language as a tool of knowledge in addition to Arabic.

In recent years, the Saudi Arabian government and educationists have expressed serious concerns about the low level of achievement in English among students in schools and universities. Although the Saudi government has exerted an enormous effort to improve English teaching and learning, students' English proficiency remains unsatisfactory and below expectations (Al-Johani, 2009; Fareh, 2010; Khan, 2011). Researchers (such as, Al-Johani, 2009; Alhawsawi, 2013; Rajab, 2013) have contended that, although students spend nine years studying English in schools, most of them graduate with a low level of English competence.

Students in Saudi Arabia lack encouragement in reading skills from their teachers, which confounds their progress in developing English proficiency (Almutairi, 2008; Al-Johani, 2009; Fareh, 2010; Khan, 2011; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). According to Fareh (2010), when it comes to English learning, most students are unmotivated and do not want to learn. In his study, Al-Johani (2009) stated that, in most English classes, teachers demotivate students as they do not provide students with examples from real-life situations when explaining, do not encourage or praise students' participation and ideas, tend to correct students' mistakes immediately, and provide constant criticism regarding their learning attempts. In addition, when students make drafts or revise their own works, they are usually left alone without any guidelines from the teacher (Khan, 2011).

Since the year 2000, many Saudi high school graduates have shown a great interest in joining colleges of languages and translation, where students are trained to become English-Arabic and Arabic-English professional translators and interpreters. Admission to such colleges has been highly competitive. The number of admitted students is continually increasing. High school graduates are admitted to colleges of languages and translation based on their high school GPA, regardless of their actual English proficiency level. No admission tests are given. Only students who transfer from other departments or other Saudi universities are given an English Admission Test.

In the past eight years, the open admission policy — that depends on the high school GPA only as an admission standard — has proved to be inadequate and some critical issues about English language education have emerged. These issues include student success rates, the percentage of graduate and dropout rates, and the allocation of resources and shortage of teaching staff, which require a re-consideration of an English college entrance exam as a new measure for admission to colleges of languages and translation. The present study aims to establish the case for a college entrance examination at Saudi English departments in general and colleges of languages and translation in particular.

Reading is considered a basic life skill, the lack of which can affect a student's academic growth and success (Pugh, Pawan, & Antommarchi, 2000). In accordance, Lyons (2003, p. 2) states that: "learning to read is critical to students' academic success and has a tremendous impact on their emotional and social development throughout life". It is the main foundation upon which a student's success in school and subsequently, throughout life, depends on. However, many students do not seem to grasp these skills early enough in their lives and as a result, struggle with rudimentary reading skills (Lyon & Weiser, 2009).

Language wise, reading is believed to be one of the most realistic communicative skills that occurs in an English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom (Mikulecky & Jeffries, 1986). In his book, Krashen (2004) asserts that reading is one of the most effective ways for second language (L2) learners to acquire language skills in context and many researchers believe reading to be the most important of the four main skills of English language learning (ELL) (Koch, 1974; Alderson, 1984; Carrell & Carrell, 2006).

According to schema theory, reading ability (i.e. reading comprehension) is the product of a reader's decoding (or word reading) skill and linguistic (or listening) comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990). The schema theory emphasises that reading comprehension is an interactive process between the reader's previous background knowledge and the text (Khemanuwong, Mohamed, & Ismail, 2018). According to the theory, EFL readers' reading comprehension is not only influenced by how easy or difficult a text is to them, but depends more on the level of being able to recall their culturally familiar background knowledge and draw cultural origin clues from the context (Carrell, 1984, 1987; Carrell & Floyd, 1987).

The schema theory also points out that the test takers' background knowledge could itself have an effect on test performance. The relationship between background knowledge and reading comprehension, in native language, has been investigated extensively, with results revealing that having background knowledge of a text would help make it more understandable (Weber, 1991). Some researchers have also provided evidence for a potential role of background knowledge in reading comprehension in a foreign language. Contextual bias involves the complex relationship of informational cues, like worldly knowledge, for instance. It has been known that worldly knowledge influences what is understood from a text. Several studies suggested that worldly knowledge is an integral part of the comprehending process. (Bransford & Johnson, 1972). When an ambiguous word is encountered, one with worldly knowledge would be able to come up with the whole meaning. This implies that two individuals with equal reading comprehension abilities but different worldly knowledge, would exhibit different degrees of comprehending the same test.

Contextual bias is unquestionably one of the natural influences that potentially dominates a test taker's judgement. Test takers are influenced by this kind of bias in an unwitting and unintentional mode, as familiarity with names, places, things and concepts mentioned in the test questions could help them to comprehend the context more easily, without which familiarity of the text could be harder to comprehend. In line with the above, Westin (2006) found that the test takers could better comprehend passages that were contextually related to them. Reading passages that were culturally, nationally and contextually bound to the test takers, help them to derive more meanings. They would subsequently be better off with worldly knowledge of the context. Studies conducted by Yu (2008) and Orellana and Reynolds (2008) also suggest that contextual settings of passages are instrumental in the test takers' performance since they tend to do better with contextually familiar materials. Remarkably, the test takers, when encountering a familiar item, will approach it with confidence. In contrast, those with no familiarity with context, could possibly become confused about the cognitive mechanism and will come up with a wrong answer (Khemanuwong et al., 2018).

Predominantly, Saudi EFL lecturers are unable to monitor the students' EFL reading abilities. There have not been any indicators that precisely tell when a particular student is in need of help and how he or she needs it. In other words, it is a summative test without a proper set of criteria. With the lack of adequate information about the standard of reading, it would be impossible to accurately determine their reading abilities. To solve these problems, it would be more practical to have some indications that can identify specific skills each student possesses and provide a score that details the skills to be improved and how to achieve the improvements. This could be help to the students, in paving the way towards autonomous learning of what they have studied in class (Keshavarz & Ashtarian, 2008).

READS is the reading evaluation and decoding system which is currently employed by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) (Mohamed, Eng, & Ismail, 2010). The READS is comprised of the encoder, the reading matrix, and the decoder. The READS, as a holistic system, is comprised of a repository of numerous batches of 60 multiple-choice reading comprehension questions, allowing lecturers to administer standardised tests and gather earned marks for further analysis. The questions are proportionally based on distribution of difficulty levels with 25 per cent, 50 per cent and 75 per cent taken as easy, average and difficult, respectively (Mok, 2000; Mohamed et al., 2010; Khemanuwong et al., 2018). Each student will be mapped to an appropriate range through a cross-reference from the analysis to a Reading Matrix, whereby primary support intervention can be provided to those students graded as "below average" or "academic warning" (Wasburn-Moses, 2006).

Nonetheless, there was a disagreement over the reliability and validity of READS as a testing instrument since this test was primarily developed for Malaysian students and thereby

involved Malaysian culture, which brought about certain contextual biases. Therefore, the original READS was deemed unfit for deployment amongst a Saudi target audience. Adapting the existing instrument, rather than developing a new one specifically for the target audience, offers a considerable amount of advantages, as using an adapted version logically permits a greater ability to generalise within an increasingly diverse population (Hambleton, 2005). Still, adapting a testing instrument is a complex task that involves a careful arrangement, especially materials and general validity for the population intended (Cassepp-Borges, Balbinotti, & Teodoro, 2010; Borsa, Damásio, & Bandeira, 2012). It is also noteworthy that the adaptation of an instrument maintains a cultural fit - being a preparation for practice in different cultural contexts (Hambleton, 2005; Sireci, Yang, Harter, & Ehrlich, 2006).

Literature Review

A major consideration against standardised testing is whether it is found to be culturally biased (Cabello, 1984). The concerns described as follows, are the most common illustrations of cultural bias that are offensive to the test takers.

1. Languages that exist in the ethnic groups in a stereotypical or a negative manner.
2. Test items that do not reflect the life experience of the test takers.
3. Words that are not familiar to the test takers and do not have the same connotations or backgrounds for all groups answering the item.

The existence of cultural bias is important to examine because some educators feel that it is inappropriate to adopt the standardised tests from other countries.

The adopted test may not be suitable for the target population with differences in culture and backgrounds. Particularly, the culture bias or interference in reading comprehension are related to social cognitive functions of the language (Cabello, 1984). To put it clearly, if an adopted test, which is intended to measure reading comprehension, for example, is flawed by cultural bias, then the test may examine the students' knowledge of the test developer's culture rather than the reading comprehension itself. The students may answer the item incorrectly because of cultural interference. Besides, without their previous schemata, the students face difficulty in reading comprehension (Khemanuwong et al., 2018).

Further, Alderson (2000) maintains that schemata are seen as interlocking mental structures representing a readers' knowledge. This may be inferred as comprehension happens because of activating a readers' prior knowledge. Schema Theory recalls when a reader reads a text. During the process of receptive skill, he integrates new information into his previous schemata. There are three types of schemata as follows:

1. Formal schemata comprises the knowledge of language and linguistic conventions: knowledge of the organisations and genres (Carrell, 1988).
2. Abstract schemata, generally referred to as story schemata, allows readers to recreate the writer's message by predicting the way in which the text will proceed (Mandler, 1984).
3. Content schemata is composed of:
 - a. subject-matter knowledge, which is the knowledge about the content of the text and;
 - b. background knowledge or knowledge of the world (Alderson, 2000). Knowledge of the world is regarded as cultural knowledge.

Moreover, Alderson (2000) states that the knowledge of the world is idiosyncratic. Our world may be dissimilar to others because everyone has his own unique history, feelings, thoughts, interests and experiences. In other words, we have different background knowledge. For instance, according to one passage of the original READS, Malaysian people may have background knowledge in relation to Bukit Mertajam (BM), which is a big city in Malaysia. In contrast, Bukit Mertajam is not familiar to Saudi test-takers since they do not have background knowledge on this city. Thus, without prior information, they cannot activate their previous content schemata to comprehend the passage.

It is a fact, that people in different parts of the world, enjoy different cultures. All of these might affect their performance. It led to an interest, and became the topic of research over the last few decades. A significant number of studies have been conducted to find out if background and cultural knowledge affect one's performance when completing tests of different language skills (Brantmeier & Vanderplank, 2008).

In a study by Chihara, Sakurai, and Oller Jr (1989), two English doze tests were given to 159 Japanese college students; one original version including English names of persons or places, and one adapted version whose English names were changed to culturally familiar names for Japanese respondents. The result showed that the respondents did better on the adapted doze test.

In another study, Murshed, Mohummed, and Al-Fallay (2010) asked a group of 74 Saudi Arabian EFL students to take part in a nine-week project on the effect of cultural knowledge on test performance. The results showed that the performance of students who completed the culturally familiar version of the tests was much greater.

Further, Sasaki (2000) investigates how content schemata activated by culturally familiar words influenced students' performance on doze tests. The study concluded that a cloze test

with culturally familiar content could activate the previous schemata. In other words, the culturally familiar doze tests function to the advantage of the test takers. In-line with that, this study aims to adapt a valid and reliable encoder, which is culturally familiar to Saudi students in order to boost the schemata. I applied a document analysis and experts' comments in control for cultural bias as a matter of course, so that obvious biasness is no longer apparent.

Methodology

To evaluate the suitability of READS for the undergraduates students in Saudi Arabia, three content experts who are experienced in English language teaching and testing were consulted. The three experts were identified as senior lecturers from Universities in Saudi Arabia. The experts were provided with the paper-based version of the test instrument of an original READS to depict their opinions on the biasness of the encoder. The original READS system was examined and analysed with the experts' views mainly concerning:

1. The biasness of the encoder (the original test batteries)
 - a. If there are cultural biasness, such as in customs and traditions.
 - b. If there are contextual biasness, such as currency, names, and places.
 - c. If there are cognitive biasness, such as the level of thinking.
 - d. If there are prejudices, such as religious and ethnicity issues.
2. The format of the encoder (the original test batteries)
 - a. If the format of the encoder is clear and well-organised.
 - b. If the type of texts is suitable.
 - c. If the length of text is suitable.
3. The level of difficulty of the encoder (the adapted test batteries)
 - a. If the level of difficulty is suitable for the Saudi universities educational level.

Results and Discussion

The experts examined and analysed the original READS system to evaluate its applicability in the universities in Saudi Arabia. The experts checked the content of the original READS according to the previously mentioned checklist. An index of consistency was used to validate the system. The findings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Expert Validation of original READS: Index of Consistency

Subject	Index of Consistency				Notes
	1	2	3	Mean	
1 There is no cultural biasness, such as in customs and traditions.	+1	+1	+1	1.0	Agree
2 There is no contextual biasness, such as currency, names, and places.	+1	0	-1	0.0	Uncertain
3 There is no cognitive biasness, such as level of thinking.	+1	-1	-1	-1.0	Disagree
4 There are no prejudices, such as religious and ethnicity issues.	+1	+1	0	0.67	Somewhat Agree
5 The format of the encoder is clear and well-organised.	+1	+1	+1	1.0	Agree
6 The type of texts is suitable.	+1	0	+1	0.67	Somewhat Agree
7 The length of text is suitable.	+1	+1	+1	1.0	Agree
8 The level of difficulty is suitable for the Saudi university educational level.	-1	-1	-1	-1.0	Disagree

From the data in Table 1, the Item Objective Congruence can be computed as follow:

$$\text{Item Objective Congruence} = \frac{1 + 0 - 1 + 0.67 + 1 + 0.67 + 1 - 1}{8} = 0.29$$

It is well known that if the value of the Item Objective Congruence is less than 0.5, then the suitability of the original READS is inadequate.

Supporting data were also gathered from the experts via a semi-structured interview. The findings from the thematic analysis of these data revealed the biasness of the encoder of the original READS. In this regards, the experts state that:

“The READS system is well designed. However, some biasness in the texts is found which leads to the need of adapting these texts. Furthermore, I believe that this test is higher than the skills of the students in Saudi Arabia. I think it will be more adequate to consider the difference between our students and Malaysian student in regard to the English Reading Comprehension” Expert 1.

“Some modifications are needed to make READS adequate with the Saudi Environments. For example, the names of the persons, cities, currency,

places, and so on are need to be changed to make the test more clearer and more focussing in the reading comprehension and not in the cultures” Expert 2.

“The level of difficulty in READS exceed the level of the Saudi Students. Also the Malaysian culture that dominate the test make it more difficult and increase its ambiguity. I believe that by adapting the biasness the system will be really useful in the Saudi universities” Expert 3

Several items were modified to make the adapted READS more suitable to the Saudi culture and environment. The adaptation was based on ten factors. These factors are cultural biasness, contextual biasness, cognitive biasness, prejudices such as religious and ethnicity issues, the format of the encoder, the type of texts, the length of the text, and the level of difficulty. The following table (Table 2) shows examples of the adaptation process and its relation to the aforementioned factors.

Table 2: Example of the Changes in the Adapted READS

No	Factors	Example
1	Cultural biasness	In Question 16-21 several changes to remove any existence of male students or male teachers in the classes attended by female students
2	Contextual biasness	1. The Photos in Questions 1-5 were changed 2. Currency, names, and places were changes in the whole test
3	Cognitive biasness	1. Questions 40-45 were totally changed 2. Questions 46-60 were totally changed
4	Prejudices	Questions 46-60 were totally changed because the music is forbidden in the Saudi environment
7	The format of the encoder	-
8	The type of texts	The texts were organised in a suitable way
9	The length of the text	-
10	The level of difficulty	Difficult Questions were modernised in the Items from 40-60

As reported in Table 2, the persons’ names, the places names, the cultural conflict items, and several questions were changed to align the texts and test items and to make it more suitable with the Saudi culture and environment. The same experts who evaluated the original

READS, also evaluated the adapted READS. The evaluation of the adapted READS is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Expert Validation of Adapted READS: Index of Consistency

Subject	Index of Consistency				Notes
	1	2	3	Mean	
1	There is no cultural biasness, such as in customs and traditions.				Agree
2	There is no contextual biasness, such as currency, names, and places.				Agree
3	There is no cognitive biasness, such as level of thinking.				Agree
4	There are no prejudices, such as religious and ethnicity issues.				Agree
5	The format of the encoder is clear and well-organised.				Agree
6	The type of texts is suitable.				Somewhat Agree
7	The length of text is suitable.				Agree
8	The level of difficulty is suitable for the Saudi university educational level.				Somewhat Disagree

From the data in Table 3, the Item Objective Congruence was computed as follows:

$$\text{Item Objective Congruence} = \frac{1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 0.67 + 1 + 0.33}{8} = 0.88$$

The value of the Item Objective Congruence is larger than 0.5, which reveals the suitability of the adapted READS in the Saudi environment. Furthermore, the reliability of the instruments was measured and presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Analysis of READS Reliability: Pilot Study

Reliability Test	No of Items	No of Participants	Reliability Value	
			Original READS	Adapted READS
Cronbach's Alpha	60	30	0.72	0.85
KR20	60	30	0.69	0.92

Based on Table 4, the adapted READS is indicated as more suitable to use in the Saudi environment.



Conclusion

The original reads went through a process of adaptation based on the selected criteria. The panel of experts assisted in the adaptation process. Subsequently, the adapted READS was also evaluated to gauge its usability. An index of consistency was used in the evaluation process of both the original, and the adapted READS. The reliability of both instruments was measured, and the adapted READS scored a greater reliability than the original READS.

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