



The Arabic Reading Challenge Initiative's Impact on Young Learners in Bahrain: A Case Study

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This case study research investigated the effect of the Arabic Reading Challenge Initiative (ARCI) on young learners aged between six and twelve years old. The sample consisted of three children: Eyad (M, 11), Retaj (F, 9), and Raneem (F, 7). They were enrolled in Bahraini Primary governmental schools. They are under the guardianship of the researcher and this made it easy to observe them closely. Seven teachers and librarians who were members of ARCI teams at school level as well as the chairperson of the ARCI committee in Bahrain were surveyed. The research investigated the following skills: word knowledge, speaking, reading, writing and other personal skills. Three questionnaires were developed by the researcher and judged by jury. About 500 titles of different genre were available for the students. The books and 15 Reading Passports to register their reading achievements (five passports per each participant) in addition to the participants' school notebooks were examined. The research found that ARCI had a positive effect on enhancing word knowledge, speaking, reading and writing skills. In addition, the close observations suggested that girls were more self-motivated than boys, and that parental support was crucial to motivating children to read.

Free, or extensive reading is still developing in the Arab world. There is an ongoing call for free reading as well as extensive reading. Arabic culture is often seen as primarily an oral culture in which people do not read extensively in their native language. On the other hand, there is other evidence which contrasts this. Let us have a close look at the most respected script in the Arab world. It is the Holy Quran which Muslims recite in Arabic everywhere on the globe. The first verse delivered to Prophet Mohammed says:

اقرأ باسم ربك الذي خلق. (1) خلق الانسان من علق. (2) اقرأ
وربك الأكرم. (3) الذي علم بالقلم. (4) علم الإنسان ما لم يعلم
Chapter 96, verses (1-5)

(1). Read! In the name of your Lord Who has created (all that exists). (2). He has created man from a clot (a piece of thick coagulated blood). (3). Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous. (4). Who has taught (the writing) by the pen. (5). He has taught man that which he knew not. (Khan and Al-Hilali, 2011, p. 1091)

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So from the dawn of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, all Muslims have been ordered to read. Thus reading in itself is a sort of worship and submission to Allah's will. In addition, the Arab Reading Index (2016) reveals that on average the individual Arab reads around 17 books and 35 hours per year. Readers in Bahrain read even more

than this, with the average Bahraini citizen spending about 50 hours a year reading 20 books. This "...[shows] that the reality is not nearly as severe as suggested by some reports or websites, some of which [have claimed] that on average Arab individuals read one quarter of a page per year, or six minutes per year" (p. 16).

There is therefore a need to reinvestigate the free reading situation in the Arab world. This research comes to investigate the impact of one of the recently launched initiatives in the Arab world known as the Arabic Reading Challenge Initiative (ARCI), on young learners, especially in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

Definition of Terms

The Arabic Reading Challenge Initiative

In this research, The Arabic Reading Challenge (ARCI) can be considered as a form of free reading competition in Arabic as participants read things other than school textbooks. ARCI was inaugurated in UAE by His Highness Sheikh Mohamed Bin Rashed Al Maktoum, Vice President & Prime Minister of AUE and ruler of Dubai in the academic year 2015/2016. The reason for this initiative is to enhance free reading in the Arabic language among Arabs and Arabic speakers across the globe. The initiative is implemented through cooperation between the ARCI high committee which is located in Dubai, and the Ministries of Education in the Arab countries where central coordination committees are formed to follow up the ARCI implementation as mentioned on the website of the initiative (www.arabicreadingchallenge.com/about).

Free/Extensive Reading

ARCI defines reading in the project as reading books and stories of any genre which

are enjoyable and are not part of school textbooks. Similarly, the extensive reading foundation defines extensive reading as a form of reading where students read very easy and enjoyable books with the aim of building their reading speed and reading fluency. In the Guide to Extensive Reading, the aim of ER is defined as follows:

The aim of Extensive Reading is to help the student become better at the skill of reading rather than reading to study the language itself. When students are reading extensively they READ: Read quickly and enjoyably with adequate comprehension so they don't need a dictionary. (2011, p. 1)

The only difference between ARCI and ER foundation's definition is that the ARCI is dedicated to reading in the L1, the Arabic language, which is the mother tongue of the students, whereas ER implies reading in an L2 or other language, rather than the L1 or mother tongue.

In this research Free Reading/Extensive Reading refers to reading in the Arabic language where participants read and summarize books and stories they like from different genres which are not part of school textbooks.

Review of Literature

Abouhadid (2003) implemented a case study program entitled "Using free reading in public libraries for developing reading comprehension for intermediate experimental language school students." The subjects were six students from experimental schools in Cairo governorate in Egypt. Abouhadid's object was to design a free reading program (FRP) to develop higher order comprehension skills for students, the six participants read and discussed

books. The study found learners' best FRP has a positive effect on learners' vocabulary, summarization activities, and spoken language.

A few years later, Abdelrasoul (2014) used reading circles to develop critical reading skills of Egyptian EFL second year preparatory school students. Forty-four students from Sohag Experimental Preparatory School participated in this study. Instruments of the study included: a pre-/post critical reading skills test (CRST), and role and reflection sheets. The results revealed that the use of reading circles strategy increased students' critical reading skills. Students mentioned that they learned how to summarize topics in few sentences. They acquired other skills such as: (1) looking up words in a dictionary, (2) differentiating between a fact and an opinion, (3) expecting, the topic of a passage or a story, (4) making connections between the stories they read and similar incidents they knew about.

In line with the above mentioned studies, Alattar and Alani (2016) implemented a study to identify the effectiveness of the Arabic Reading Challenge Initiative in the development of creative reading skills of primary school students, grade (5), in the Sultanate of Oman. It also aimed to identify the differences in the development of creative reading skills in terms of gender. The study sample consisted of 70 male and female students who were purposely selected from seven schools in two districts in the Muscat governorate for the year 2015/2016. The Creative Reading Skills Test (CRST) was developed for grade 5 students and included 30 items in its final form. The test included different reading skills (i.e., fluency, flexibility, originality). Statistically significant differences were found between the control group and

experimental group which means that the participation of fifth grade students in the reading challenge project has had a significant impact in the development of creative reading skills. It has positively influenced the development of students' creative reading skills.

Students' Registration and Participation in ARCI

To take part in ARCI students should register their names with the school librarian who is a member of ARCI committee at school level and receive reading passports. There are five passports for each participant. They come in different colors. They are as follows: red, green, blue, silver and golden. The inside pages of passports are similar and the different colors just identify the amount and order of readings. The red passport contains the first ten books and stories which were read by the student while the golden passport includes the final ten books and stories.



Figure 1. Student's Reading Passports

When a student finishes a passport, s/he delivers it to the school librarian and takes

the next one. This continues till the student delivers 5 passports in which s/he summarizes 50 books and stories in total. Each reading passport consists of 12 pages. The first two pages are the introduction to the ARCI and guidelines to use it. The remaining 10 pages are to summarize in. The page is designed as follows:

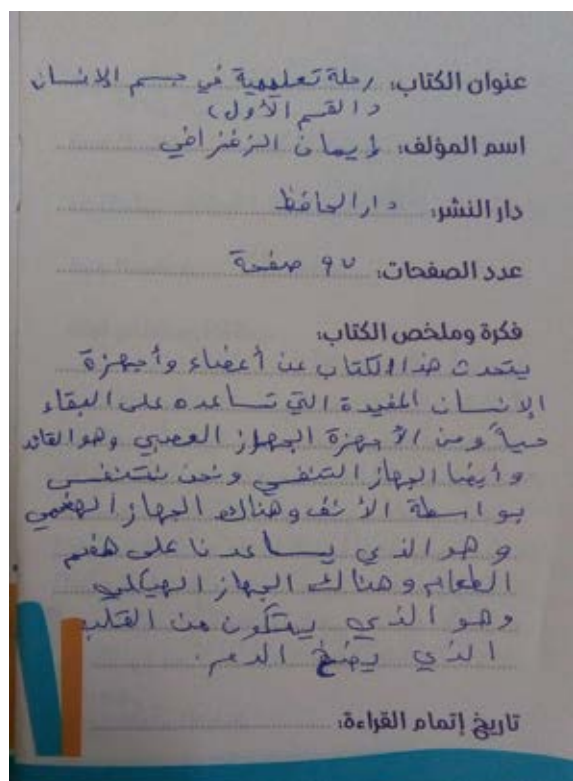


Figure 2. An inside page of the reading passport in Arabic.

The items in the reading passport translate into English as *Book Title, Author, Publisher, Number of Pages, Book Summary* and *Date of Completion*.

The books and stories vary in length according to the age group. Children from 6 to 9 years of age who are enrolled in the foundation stage read books and stories consisting of 7 to 20 pages. Students from 10 to 12 who are enrolled in the second cycle of primary stage should read books and stories more than 20 pages. Students who are older than

12 years read books more than 30 pages. (<http://www.arabreadingchallenge.com/en/tool-box>) When students finish their reading passports, they go through three interviews. One is at the school level to select the best six readers out of the candidates. Next comes the governorate level and the best ten readers compete at the national level. The best reader is selected and represents his/her country in Dubai, where the best Arab reader is nominated.

Tools of Research

Three questionnaires were prepared and developed by the researcher. The first questionnaire was for the students, the second for teachers and librarians who supervised students at school level, and the third one aimed to seek information from the head of ARCI committee at the national level. The questionnaires were designed by using google forms. The tools were written in English and Arabic (details can be found in the Appendix). Students used school and public libraries to read and summarize. About 500 titles of different genre were chosen and read by the three subjects investigated in depth. The researcher helped the 3 subjects obtain the books, read and summarize them. Fifteen Reading Passports were used to register the reading achievement (five per participant of the three before-mentioned subjects). Participants' school notebooks were also investigated.

Findings and Discussion

In this part, the researcher reports the findings from the student's questionnaire followed by the observations of Eyad, Retaj and Raneem. Next, he discusses the findings from the teachers and librarians' questionnaire. Finally, the researcher concludes with the findings from the head of the ARCI committee in Bahrain.

Findings from Students' Questionnaire

The following findings are from students' perspectives. The investigation of the Arabic Reading Challenge Initiative's Impact (ARCI Impact) on young learners reveals that the three subjects of this case study have positively improved their reading, speaking, word knowledge and writing skills.

ARCI's Impact on Word Knowledge

ARCI has a positive effect on word knowledge: The three subjects strongly agreed that besides reading independently, they could guess the meaning of unknown words. Investigating the reading passports and the school notebooks, the three students proved that they have learnt lots of new words. They were also able to select from words with similar meanings. They showed interest in word games such as crosswords and hangman.

ARCI Affects Speaking Skills and Fluency of Speech

The subjects showed fluency of speech and thoughts when they engaged in discourse and discussions with peers and adults. ARCI enabled them to take part in classroom presentations and school broadcasts.

ARCI's Impact on Reading Skills

Participation in ARCI has enhanced students' reading abilities. Students showed interest in reading different book genres. Eyad showed interest in adventure books, science fiction and crime stories. Retaj and Raneem showed interest in fairy tales and books about nature and the human body. Students said that they liked participating in ARCI and would participate again. They enjoyed summarizing books and stories. Reading did not prevent them from studying but on the contrary it

helped them with their Arabic assignments as they understood what they read without any help from others. They totally agreed they could read faster than before.

ARCI's Impact on Writing Skills

Eyad, Retaj and Raneem showed an improvement in their handwriting. They also demonstrated fluency of ideas and a remarkable increase in the number of sentences and words used in a sentence. They used correct grammar and that was reflected in their academic performance. They had a flow of ideas and wrote longer sentences than before in a better handwriting with minimum writing mistakes whether in the mechanics or grammar.

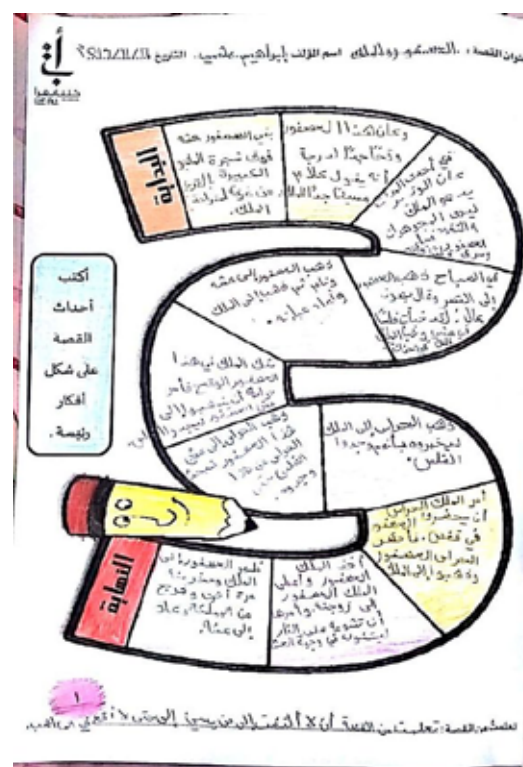


Figure 3. Summary of a story by Retaj from her handbook "Let's Read".

Other Findings

Parental support was crucial to enhance students' readings. In the open ended

part of the survey, the students said that their parents helped them get books and encouraged them to read and summarize. They mentioned that they liked the family support especially when parents read books with them.

Generally speaking the above findings are supported with findings of Abouhadid (2003), Abdelrasoul (2014) and Alattar & Alani (2016). The free reading activities whether in L1 as in Alattar & Alani's study or in L2 as in Abouhadid's and Abdelrasoul's studies have positive effects in increasing vocabulary volume, summarizing, reading, speaking, and writing skills. The interviews conducted with Eyad, Retaj and Raneem also suggest that while both girls and boys are improving, growth in language skills is more observable in girls which contradicts the findings of Alattar & Alani who found that gender differences do not affect the growth of participants' language skills as a result of participation in ARCI. In the following lines, the research reports closely on each of the three subjects; Eyad, Retaj and Raneem.

Eyad

Eyad joined ARCI at the age of 11 when he was in primary six. Now he is in intermediate one. There are around one thousand students at the school. He is participating in the third round of ARCI for the school year 2017/2018. Eyad is the elder brother of Raneem and Retaj. He performs well at school but he used to struggle with four Arabic letters in speaking and in writing (ض DHA/ ظ ZHA/ ط TTHAA/ and ت TAA). He was reluctant to take part in ARCI, but with support and encouragement from the family he started to read books and stories with his sisters. At first, he found it difficult to spend time on reading. He preferred to play on the mobile phone. Gradually, he started to sit with the family during the

reading time and showed interest and participated in stories and books' discussions. He also started to read alone but found it hard to summarize. Most of the time, he read the same stories as Retaj and copied her summaries. He likes reading now but he still does not want to summarize, as he feels it is hard. At school he scores high marks in all subjects but when it comes to reading he speaks well and has overcome the challenge with the four Arabic letters in writing, dictation and in speaking. He still cannot write freely or has a flow of ideas like his sisters. Close observation shows that he now places a book of short stories *Hekayat Amou Mahmoud* on the pillow and reads some of it before he sleeps. This is an indication that he is developing into an independent reader. He shows interest in reading books about adventures and science fiction. He has just bought a book called *Username: Evie* by Joe Sugg.

Retaj

Now, the researcher discusses the observation of the second subject of this case study. Retaj started participation in ARCI at the age of nine when she was in primary four. She is nine years old now. She is the sister of Raneem and in primary five and goes to the same school with her sister. At the beginning, Retaj struggled with the Arabic vowels in her writing, especially the long AA and the short A (ة. ح ت ف ل ل ا و ل ص و ل ا ة ز م ه و ف ل ل ا ل ا). By the time she finished the third reading passport, she had overcome this problem. Her handwriting has improved greatly.

Retaj was the quickest to learn how to summarize. She needed less support than Raneem and Eyad in summarizing the stories and books. From the third passport she was able to summarize on her own. She can now read, comment, and summarize without the need of help either from her father or her mother. She has a flow of

ideas and richness of vocabulary. The most remarkable thing about her is her hunger for reading and posing questions. She has read over 400 books and stories so far. She may ask you up to 50 questions, if you sit with her for only about ten minutes. You can call her a “question generator”. She never gets tired of asking. At the moment of writing these lines she has summarized and finished five passports for the third round of ARCI for the school year 2017/ 2018. She has moved forward from reading short stories and simple books to reading novels. At the moment she is reading an Arabic translation of *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote and *I Am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb. Retaj is capable now of writing freely about any topic. She comes with original ideas.

Raneem

Finally comes Raneem who participated in ARCI at the age of six when she was in primary one at Muharraq Primary School for Girls in Bahrain. Now she is in primary two at the same school and is participating in ARCI. She is very enthusiastic about reading and participation.

Raneem can read Arabic words easily. She has a lot of short stories at home. She is the youngest of the three subjects of the present case study. This means that everybody at home can help her with her readings. Her family members gather every evening and read a story and discuss it. The real challenge with Raneem is that, she does not know how to summarize a story. Gradually, she has learned how to recognize the main incidents in a story and the main characters. This is a big step towards learning how to summarize. At first, Raneem used to copy entire pages from a story. It has taken time until she became able to select incidents and characters. Now she can summarize a story on her own. She also participates in

the school activities. Her teacher has chosen her to be the “Little Teacher”. She helps her classmates and re-teaches them the new topics. She is also a member of the school broadcast.

When she started writing in her passports, Raneem’s handwriting was in pencil and the words were stuck and unclear. Gradually, her handwriting has improved and become readable without any effort. Her writing skill has also improved. She can now compose her own sentences. She can rewrite the summary of a story in her own words. She can also write about new topics without any difficulty. She was chosen the queen of free writing at school this year.

Generally speaking, the three children have developed their skills in reading, speaking and writing through their participation in ARCI in two seasons so far. They read independently now even after submitting their passports. They play word games such as crosswords and hangman. Eyad is developing but not as fast as his sisters. Retaj is reading faster than her older brother and younger sister. In the following lines, the researcher narrates and comments on the findings from ARCI survey at school level.

Findings of School Supervisors and Librarians

The respondents stated that students at their schools have benefited from ARCI as their vocabulary has increased. ARCI has raised students’ awareness of the importance of free reading. Their students have read more books than before and have become capable of summarizing and reporting about books and stories.

The respondents mentioned that they have supported their students to join ARCI and provided them with reading passports and made books and stories available for

them. They organized a competition at school entitled "The Best Story Teller" to encourage students to narrate stories which widened students' speaking skills. They dedicated part of the school budget to buy new books for the school library. They organized school trips and took students to book fairs and public libraries. They led a school initiative called "Let's Read" and handed every child at school a handbook to summarize stories and books in it. One period was dedicated each week from the class timetable for reading. The respondents said that they used a matrix designed by ARCI high committee to assess students who were participating in ARCI. The teachers and librarians concluded that they were doing a great job but they needed extra time and financial support to be able to continue their mission and support the increasing numbers of students participating in ARCI. The researcher ends this paper with the findings from the head of ARCI in Bahrain.

The ARCI Committee at Country Level Questionnaire

This questionnaire was implemented by the researcher through an interview with Nadia Seyadi, Head of ARCI committee in Bahrain on 16th January 2018. The findings from this interview were that the number of participants has been increased from 18,000 in the school year in 2015/2016 to 24,268 in the second cycle of the initiative in the school year 2016/2017. Some schools have been improving their performance to help and attract more students to participate such as AL-Eman private school which was nominated the best Arabian school to implement ARCI in the Arab world and was given a million dollars cash prize to continue its efforts. She also mentioned that a secondary school has translated twenty books into Braille to enable blind students to participate. She added that Al

Hid Intermediate Girls School has an initiative called "We Read with an Artistic Eye". Students read books and designed collage and drew pictures for them. Some schools have tried new strategies to encourage students to read and participate in ARCI. For example, "Let's Read" was part of the Arabic Language course for all grades. This has encouraged students to participate in ARCI and continue reading. She finally concluded that there are plans to hold reading events in public places.

Conclusion

This case study has shown the positive effect of ARCI on students' word knowledge, speaking, reading and writing skills. It also suggests that girls are more self motivated than boys in free and extensive reading. Parental support regarding children has proved to be effective in enhancing reading, discussing and summarizing books and stories. The initiatives of some schools such as "Let's Read," "We Read with an Artistic Eye," and preparing books and stories in Braille could lead to attracting more readers. The total number of young readers participating in ARCI has increased from three million in the first round to about seven million in the second cycle in the school year 2016/ 2017.

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Appendix

Links to the online forms:

1. The ARCI team at state/ country level tool: <https://goo.gl/forms/k6PLUvEPdFwMa6Fl1>. This tool consists of nine statements and it seeks information about the implementation of ARCI at country level.

2. The ARCI supervisors at school level tool: <https://goo.gl/forms/TsyJHrLHfTb8SesZ2>. This tool consists of 14 statements and asks about position role related to ARCI and the effect of the ARCI on students' language skills and how they assess the participants.

3. Students' Questionnaire: <https://goo.gl/forms/DBOrBk9pS25Nmhdq2>. This tool consists of 34 statements and it seeks to collect information about students' backgrounds and the effect of ARCI on their reading skills, speaking skills, word knowledge and writing skills in addition to attitudes towards free reading.

4- The link to Eyad, Retaj and Raneem performance: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0Bw01BHFmGfwgNUcWdWRNbjhUanc?usp=sharing>

5- The numbers of participants in ARCI according to countries second round 2016/ 2017: <http://arabreadingchallenge.com/ar/country#>