Some Effects of Proficiency and Practice on Beliefs about Academic Reading

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Abstract

Reading for academic purposes in both first language (L1) and second language (L2) contexts has long been the subject of research using measures such as reading strategy inventories, reading recall protocols, and a variety of experimental designs aimed to examine the relative contribution to their reading ability of the readers' L1 or L2, type and complexity of text, content and cultural familiarity, among other factors. However, particularly in the second language context, there is much less published information about other variables that may influence reading success, including learner beliefs about reading. One of the main challenges faced by learners studying for a specific purpose such as medicine is to develop a high standard of reading fluency and accuracy in order to succeed in their professional aims. Those enrolled in academic programmes in their home countries, such as the medical students who are the subject of this paper, often have had little previous experience of academic reading in English, may be reluctant or sporadic readers even in their native language, and have developed negative or unhelpful beliefs about reading in English based mainly on their prior schooling or home experiences. The expectations and demands placed on them by the new academic experience may be in conflict with these beliefs, causing initial difficulties in comprehension and learning. This study explores the nature of these initial beliefs as well as changes in learner beliefs about their academic reading as related to practice and experience.

Keywords: Reading, Learner beliefs, EFL/ESL, EAP, ESP

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Theoretical Background

The development of enabling or disabling beliefs and attitudes to reading has been traced to variables such as previous experience of reading in L1 or L2, attitudes to reading for pleasure or academic purposes, the influence of family and peers on reading attitudes and beliefs, opportunities to read, the effects of teachers and the instructional context of reading beliefs, and cultural attitudes to reading (Chapman & Tunmer, 2003; McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995; Wigfield, 1997). Beliefs have also been linked to psychological constructs such as metacognitive knowledge, motivation, including the role of affect, such as reading anxiety (Saito, Garza & Horwitz, 1999), and epistemology. A brief overview of some of these studies that helped inform the present investigation follows.

While there are few studies focusing specifically on learner beliefs about academic reading in the second language (L2) setting, there has been considerable research on beliefs about the reading of college students studying in their native language (L1). In the field of educational psychology, Schommer (1990) undertook experimental studies of college students' beliefs about the nature of knowledge (i.e., their epistemological beliefs) and how these affected educational outcomes as measured by their understanding of texts. Her research concluded that college students who hold context-oriented beliefs (believing that knowledge is complex, tentative and derived from reason) as opposed to those who are fact-oriented (believing knowledge is simple, certain and handed down by authorities) may be less likely to fail to integrate information or monitor comprehension.

More recent research (Muis, 2007) hypothesized that prior knowledge plays a role in the development of constructivist epistemic beliefs (i.e., those beliefs that facilitate self-

regulation of learning, and represent a view that knowledge is relative, rather than simple). Students with beliefs that were less constructivist (i.e., those with beliefs in simple knowledge handed down by the teacher) were more likely to use "surface-level strategies like rote memorization (p. 181)" in contrast to those with more constructivist beliefs who may use "high level strategies, such as elaboration and integration of information (p. 181)." This latter group is predicted to have better performance outcomes.

Early studies on language learner beliefs using the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1987) were generated by an expectation that a better understanding of learner beliefs about language learning could inform teachers' understanding of students' strategy use, and thus help students repair ineffective strategies. A number of researchers, most notably Wenden (1986, 1987, 1998, 1999), have also linked beliefs about language learning to a learner's metacognitive knowledge. Based on Flavell's (1979) three-part model of metacognitive knowledge (person, task and strategic knowledge), learners' beliefs fit into the "person" category of strategic awareness, which relates to beliefs that learners have about themselves and others as learners, as well as factors that facilitate or inhibit language acquisition, such as age, aptitude, and motivation (Wenden, 1998). Wenden's interest in learner beliefs also has pedagogical aims, in that she urges teachers to examine learner beliefs and their impact on learning (1986). How learner beliefs and metacognitive knowledge change over time and in different learning contexts are also proposed by Wenden as important research areas (1999).

An investigation by Yang (2004) on the effects on reading strategies on beliefs about reading in a group of Chinese graduate students studying in the USA found they expressed five beliefs: it was important to read in English for comprehension for academic purposes;

reading extensively in English would help expand a reader's English vocabulary and overall English language skills; reading in English was for information and pleasure; reading comprehension was based on linguistic knowledge as well as other knowledge sources such as background knowledge; good readers use a variety of different strategies to read with good comprehension and at a fast rate.

Although positive attitudes and facilitative beliefs are important factors in reading success, second language learners are also faced with the problem of decoding texts, especially at beginning stages of reading, when their linguistic resources are limited. At lower proficiency levels, translation from the mother tongue to the L2 and vice versa are frequent strategies (Cohen, 1998; O'Malley & Chamot, 1991; Wenden, 1987), and translation continues to occupy an important role in L2 reading even among proficient readers with advanced academic aims (e.g., postgraduate Chinese students) (Li & Munby, 1996). Beliefs about translation have been less investigated, although statements relating to translation and the role of vocabulary (i.e., understanding word meanings) are found in beliefs questionnaires, such as the BALLI, which includes the statement, "*The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language.*" A questionnaire-based study of Taiwanese learners by Posen Liao (2006) determined that most respondents found translation helpful to check comprehension, reduce anxiety and enhance motivation. Less proficient students were more reliant on translating word for word and writing Chinese translations above English texts but more proficient students translated only when necessary and relied more on comprehending text.

The present study was undertaken with the aim of contributing to the small body of existing research into language learner beliefs about reading. In particular, it was concerned

with the beliefs about reading of a specific group of academic readers, Arabic-speaking medical students studying through the medium of English. The aim of the study was to probe the extent to which their success as academic readers is influenced by their reading strategies and habits, as linked to their underlying beliefs and attitudes to reading.

The following research questions form the basis for this study:

1. What beliefs about reading are held by Arabic-speaking English learners studying medicine through the medium of English?
2. How are these beliefs related to English reading ability, as determined by these students' self-assessment of their reading proficiency?
3. Are there any differences in their beliefs about reading according to their year of study?

Method

My particular interest in learner beliefs about reading was triggered by a learner biography study conducted with a 5th year Saudi Arabian medical student who enthusiastically endorsed reading of all genres as the key to learning English (Malcolm, 2005). However, his initial experiences reading in English for Academic Purposes were far from successful, and appeared to be very much influenced by his school experiences, which in turn had convinced him reading was unimportant and led him to dislike reading. How he overcame this opinion and became a successful academic reader formed the impetus for the present study.

The most widely-used device for tapping learners' beliefs so far has been the questionnaire, as reported in the vast majority of the studies cited above. While second

language researchers (e.g., Brown, 2003; Dörnyei, 2003; Sakui & Gaies, 1999) caution that questionnaire-based research has many disadvantages, they also point out that its relative ease of construction and administration compared to more labour-intensive methods such as interviews and diaries makes it appealing. The questionnaire devised for this study was formulated based on transcripts of focus group interviews conducted as well as a survey of existing questionnaires about attitudes and beliefs about reading among native English-speaking readers (Burke, 1987; Henk & Melnick, 1995; Jiménez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1996; "Literacy trust online questionnaire," 2005; McKenna et al. 1995). Some items derived from a learner biography study (Malcolm, 2005) were also added. The questions were grouped into four areas: general attitudes to reading, attitudes to texts, sources of help with reading, and reading ability and background. Four female and seven male students, from the three Arab Gulf nations (Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia) were interviewed in focus groups or individually. Statements extracted from the transcribed interviews were the basis for the final 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire comprising forty-four items. It also contained a six-step self-report scale for participants to indicate their perceived reading ability (ranging from poor to excellent). Based on this self-report measure, students were divided into two reading proficiency groups.

The final questionnaires were made available in both Arabic and English (participants could choose either version) and distributed to students in Years One and Three of their medical studies. Thirty-one completed questionnaires from Year One and 33 from Year Three, representing around 20% of the intake, were used in the analysis. Responses to the questionnaire were tabulated and measurements of central tendency calculated. These included mean scores for each item for each group of students according

to their year of study as well as their self-evaluated degree of reading proficiency. The data were then collated, ranked and compared. Findings were then presented in tabular form as shown in the following section.

Results

Table 1 shows the results for the first research question, concerning the beliefs reported by these medical students. Statements are ranked by mean score according to order of agreement with all 44 statements of the questionnaire for both groups of medical students (Years One and Three). The ten statements that received the highest agreement and the ten which received the least agreement are indicated in boldface font. In general, there was a high level of agreement (>3.5) with most statements (33 of the 44).

Table 1

Rank order of agreement with belief statements (Years 1 and 3 combined: n=64) (on a scale from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree)

Rank	*Statement*	*Mean agreement*
1.	People who start reading English as children can read better for their studies when they're older.	4.67
2.	Understanding a text is more important than memorizing it.	4.59
3.	As I practice reading more, dictionary use will decrease.	4.51
4.	If I am interested in the content of a text, I will read it more willingly.	4.48
5.	If I know most of the words, I can understand a reading.	4.41
6.	Reading is the best way to learn a lot of vocabulary.	4.28
7.	I have to find my own way to study and understand readings.	4.24
8.	People who speak English well can understand well when they read English.	4.23
8.	I will read more if I want to, not if I am forced to.	4.23
10.	I should translate only the words I think are important, not every word.	4.17
10.	I will improve my study reading after some time.	4.17
12.	Reading in English will help me to speak in English.	4.13
13.	Reading general English texts helps me improve my reading of scientific and medical texts.	4.00
14.	I will improve my English grammar by reading a lot.	3.98
15.	I enjoy reading medical and scientific books.	3.95

16.	Studying in English is the best way to improve my reading skills in English.	3.94
17.	If I think of the good marks I will get from reading for my studies, I can motivate myself to study more.	3.92
17.	It's better to figure out the meanings of general English words from the text than the dictionary.	3.92
17.	I should use a dictionary to check the meaning of special scientific or medical words in a reading.	3.92
20.	Reading is the best way to learn English.	3.88
21.	By reading a lot in English, I will be able to think in English.	3.86
22.	Spending time with people who read a lot can make you a better reader.	3.80
23.	When I read English for fun, I don't have to understand every word.	3.78
24.	I enjoy reading stories in English.	3.75
25.	It's easy for Arabic speakers to become good readers of English.	3.70
26.	I read English differently when I read for my studies than when I read for fun.	3.69
27.	I like to read in my free time.	3.66
28.	If my parents encourage me to read, I will read more.	3.63
29.	I can improve my reading skills by taking a course.	3.62
30.	I don't mind if I can understand most of the content in a reading, but not the entire reading.	3.61
31.	When I read an English medical or scientific text, I think I must understand every word for my future as a doctor.	3.56
31.	If I don't want to read, I cannot motivate myself.	3.56
33.	The best way to improve my English reading skills is just to read a lot.	3.50
34.	If my grammar is poor, I will make a lot of mistakes in understanding a reading.	3.44
35.	I am satisfied with my level of reading ability in English	3.33
36.	The most important part of reading in English is learning how to translate from Arabic.	3.06
37.	When I open a book and don't understand a word, I think I am not good in English.	3.03
38.	The teacher will tell me how to read for my studies.	2.95
39.	I feel anxious if I don't understand all the words in a reading.	2.91
40.	When I read an English medical or scientific text, I should memorize all the information in it.	2.77
41.	I find it very stressful to read English medical and scientific books.	2.72
42.	If I am a good reader in Arabic, I will be a good reader in English.	2.69
43.	I read in English only because I have to for my studies.	2.50
44.	When required reading gets difficult, I give up.	2.48

The second research question concerned possible differences in beliefs about reading according to year of study. The results for this research question are presented in Table 2.

Considerably higher means for nine of the statements of the questionnaire were obtained for Year One students compared to those in Year Three.

Table 2

Summary of major differences in reported beliefs between Year One and Year Three medical students (mean scores)

Statement	Year One (n= 31)	Year Three (n=33)
When I read in English, I think I must understand every word for my future as a doctor.	4.03	3.15
When I open a book and cannot understand a word, I think I am not good in English.	3.47	2.65
I feel anxious if I do not understand every word in a reading.	3.33	2.53
I am satisfied with my level of reading ability in English.	2.9	3.71
If I think of the good marks I can get from reading for my studies, I can motivate myself to read more.	4.27	3.62
Reading is the best way to learn English.	4.17	3.62
The teacher will tell me how to read for my studies.	3.27	2.68
I read in English only because I have to for my studies.	2.83	2.21
I find it very stressful to read English medical and scientific books.	3.03	2.44

The third research question addressed the relationship between language proficiency, as measured by a self-report rating, and beliefs of the questionnaire. The self-rating scale had six numbers, ranging from Excellent (5 or 6) at one end to Poor (1 or 2) at the other. Sixty-two of the sixty-four students completed this section of the questionnaire. The great majority of students considered their reading ability in English to be either average (3 or 4 on this scale) or very good to excellent (5 or 6 on the scale). Twenty-nine students in total considered their reading ability in English to be average, 21 Year One students and only 8 in Year Three. Of the 32 self-rating their reading ability as very good or excellent, 8 were first-year students while 24 were in Year Three.

Table 3

Major differences in reported beliefs according to self-rated proficiency level (mean scores) *

Statement	Average reading ability (n = 29)	Very good to excellent reading ability (n= 32)
When I read an English medical or scientific text, I think I must understand every word for my future as a doctor.	4.0	3.06
The teacher will tell me how to read for my studies.	3.31	2.5
I am satisfied with my level of reading ability in English.	2.83	3.78
If I think of the good marks I can get from reading English for my studies, I can motivate myself to study more.	4.31	3.56
When I open a book and don't understand a word, I think I am not good in English.	3.45	2.66
People who can speak English well can understand well when they read.	4.55	3.94
I feel anxious if I do not know all the words in a reading.	3.28	2.5

*Average = 3 or 4 on a 6 step scale; Very good to excellent= 5 or 6 on a 6 step scale.

Table 3 above contains seven statements in which there were considerably greater mean scores for students of self-rated average proficiency than those who self-rated their ability as high. Not surprisingly, high proficiency students were generally much more satisfied with their level of reading ability than those of average proficiency.

Discussion

The responses to the questionnaire are discussed in relation to the three research questions. The first section concerns itself with combined results. Of four statements about attitudes to reading, the highest support was for enjoying reading medical and scientific books (3.94). Students generally disagreed that they read only because they had to for their studies (2.5). A considerable number said they enjoyed reading stories in English (3.75) while fewer said they liked to read in their free time (3.69). Although it is not surprising that medical students would agree they like reading medical and scientific books, the fact that they also

seem to have positive attitudes to general reading, outside their studies, might be less anticipated. However, some students may be responding in a way that they expect would please the researcher, which is another drawback to this type of investigation.

Reading specialists agree that reading purpose has an effect on the way reading texts are processed (Alderson, 2000; Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2002). These students mostly agreed that "*I read English differently when I read for my studies than when I read for fun."* (3.69) and *"When I read English for fun, I don't have to understand every word."* (3.75). Students also strongly agreed that "*Reading general English texts helps me improve my reading of scientific and medical texts.*" (4.0), certainly a view that reading teachers try to put across to their students, especially those who are reluctant readers of anything not directly related to their academic major. On the other hand, these students agreed less strongly that *"When I read an English or scientific text, I think I must understand every word for my future as a doctor*."(3.56). This may relate less to the type of text, however, than to epistemological beliefs, (i.e., that knowledge in academic books is invariable and must be learned, "memorized"). As discussed in the literature review, studies have shown that students with more complex epistemological beliefs (those who see knowledge as relative, and context-oriented) perform better academically (Muis, 2007; Schommer, 1990). Rote learning and memorization are associated with surface-level approaches and poorer academic outcomes. The students in this investigation strongly supported the statements *"Understanding a text is more important than memorizing it"* (4.59), and "*I have to find my own way to study and understand readings"* (4.24) while there was less agreement that *"The teacher will tell me how to read for my studies"*(2.95).

Therefore, it would seem that a majority of these students appear to have beliefs relating to epistemology that are complex and positive, unlike the stereotype often associated with Arab students as rote learners and teacher dependent.

A strongly-held belief of Hamad, the subject of the learner biography referred to above (Malcolm, 2005), was that reading was the best way to learn English, mostly because he believed so many skills could be improved through reading, including vocabulary, grammar and speaking. There was considerable support among the respondents for the belief that "*Reading is the best way to learn English*" (3.88), as well as the idea "*By reading a lot in English, I will be able to think in English"* (3.86), thinking in English being a desired goal of language proficiency. There was even greater support for the statements *"Reading in English will help me to speak in English"* (4.18) and *"Reading is the best way to learn a lot of vocabulary"* (4.28) while there was also considerable support for the statement *"I will improve my English grammar by reading a lot"* (3.98). Thus, it appears these students mostly agree about the benefits of reading for improving all their English skills.

Proficiency in reading in the mother tongue is generally considered an advantage when learning to read in an L2, as it is assumed that once past a "threshold level" of language proficiency reading skills can be transferred (Alderson, 1984; Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995; Carrell, 1991; Lee & Schallert, 1997). However, the statement *"If I am a good reader in Arabic, I will be a good reader in English"* was near the lowest in ranking with a mean agreement of 2.5. It may be that the intention of the item was not clear to the respondents, who themselves are excellent readers of Arabic, yet have struggled with English. For them,

the idea of transferring skills from their native language could be quite far from their lived experience of trying to make sense of English academic texts. The same personal experience may also have influenced some choices for the statement *"It's easy for Arabic speakers to become good readers of English"* (3.7). A statement relating to translating *"The most important part of reading in English is learning how to translate from Arabic*" did not receive as much support (3.06). This statement was adapted from one of the beliefs statements in the BALLI (Horwitz, 1987) and was included because translating is such an important and widespread strategy at the initial stages of these students' academic reading.

The important role of environmental, cultural and social factors in supporting literacy has long been recognized, so statements were included to examine beliefs about some of these factors. The respondents agreed that *"Spending time with people who read a lot can make you a better reader"* (3.8). Many studies of L1 readers also highlight the importance of parental support for reading (e.g., Purcell-Gates, 2000) and these students mostly agreed that *"If my parents encourage me to read, I will want to read more" (*3.66). But the statement they most strongly supported and that ranked first was "*People who start reading English as children can read better for their studies when they are older"* (4.67). This strong agreement may be influenced by the evidence around them, as many students with a limited English background compare their reading fluency to that of their peers who attended English-medium schools since childhood.

Learning to handle the emotional demands on reading in another language is also an important part of becoming an effective academic reader. These students in general,

however, did not strongly agree with the statements, *"I find it very stressful to read medical and scientific books"* (2.72); *"I feel anxious if I don't understand all the words in a reading"* (2.91) or "*When I open a book and don't understand a word, I think I am not good in English"* (3.03). In general, they agreed *"I don't mind if I can understand most of the content in a reading, but not the entire reading"* (3.61). Thus, it appears the respondents are quite able to handle the emotional aspects of their academic reading. This may be attributed to the fact that many of them are already quite proficient readers, according to their self-ratings and as discussed below.

For beginners, translating the text into their L1 may be the only way of getting to its meaning until decoding skills and vocabulary knowledge have improved. While the use of bilingual dictionaries and translators is generally discouraged in the reading class, all reading teachers are aware of how dependent their students are on these tools. Rather, the skill of getting meaning from context is one that is much encouraged in the English reading classroom. These students mostly agreed that *"It's better to figure out the meanings of general English words from the text than the dictionary"* (3.92), but they also believed "*I should use a dictionary to check the meaning of special scientific or medical words in a reading"* (3.92). There was strong agreement with the statement *"I should translate only the words I think are important, not every word."*(4.17), as well as *"As I practice reading more, dictionary use will decrease"* (4.51). Thus, they seem to support what most reading teachers would consider enabling beliefs about translation and dictionary use. It is important to remember, however, that the respondents are generally proficient readers, already possessing the English language competence that make translating every word unnecessary.

The respondents to this questionnaire are motivated readers, especially that success in their future career is so closely related to their skill as academic readers. Nonetheless, at times their motivational beliefs must be put to the test, as they try to manage the quantity of complex reading required for their field. While they strongly agree *"I will read more if I want to, not if I am forced to"* (4.23) and "*If I am interested in the content of a text, I will read it more willingly"* (4.48), at times they are required to read content that is less than interesting. There is some agreement with the statement *"If I don't want to read, I cannot motivate myself"* (3.56), but much less for *"When required reading gets difficult, I give up"* (2.48). These students can persist when reading is hard, even if they may be extrinsically motivated, as shown by their strong agreement with the statement *"If I think of the good marks I will get from reading for my studies, I can motivate myself to study more"* (3.92).

Some statements were intended to probe student's agreement with the widely-quoted claim that the best way to improve reading skills is to read. The support for this statement was generally neutral (3.5), while there was slightly stronger support for the statement *"I can improve my reading skills by taking a course"* (3.63). There was much more agreement with the statement *"Studying in English is the best way to improve my reading skills in English"* (3.94). The students agreed most with the statement *"I will improve my study reading after some time"* (4.17). Their current experience is probably a factor in this, as the proof that their reading is improving is a daily reality, and the conviction that their reading will improve is evident from their peers who went through the same experience.

Many of these medical students, particularly those with limited exposure to English outside the classroom, are quite inhibited when they find themselves in the same first-year English class with fluent speakers. Whether they think these fluent English speakers are also good readers of English was a question I was curious about. In fact, there was strong agreement that *"People who speak English well can understand well when they read English"* (4.23). Two other statements in this group related to the relative importance of word knowledge or grammatical ability in understanding reading. The students strongly agreed *"If I know most of the words, I can understand a reading"* (4.41) but were less in agreement with the statement *"If my grammar is poor, I will make a lot of mistakes in reading"* (3.44). The need to know words seems to be a decisive belief as the strong support for the statements related to vocabulary shows. The final question, *"I am satisfied with my level of reading ability in English"* was not as strongly supported overall (3.33), indicating that, even though these students generally rated themselves as average or proficient readers, they still felt there was room for improvement of their English reading skills.

Results Related to Year of Study

The second research question asked if there were differences in reported beliefs according to year of study. As summarized in Table 2, first-year students were more likely to agree with statements relating to word knowledge, affective responses to reading, such as feeling anxious when they did not know all the words, and the role of the teacher in helping them to know what to read. More first-year students agreed that they should know every word of a medical or scientific text while they agreed that they felt anxious if they did not know

every word and thought that they were not good in English if they could not understand a word in an English book. Their strong support for these statements probably reflects their lack of experience reading these types of texts and the perception that vocabulary is the biggest obstacle to overcome. The fact that they agreed that the teacher would tell them how to read for their studies may be a holdover from their high school experiences, which students have reported were highly teacher-centred and limited to school texts. Interestingly, first-year students were also more likely to agree that reading was the best way to learn English, perhaps due to their on-going experience, being forced to read for their studies, and making gains in their English comprehension and vocabulary as a result. Perhaps the most striking difference between the respondents in years one and three is in the area of self-confidence and motivation. Fewer year one students felt satisfied with their level of reading ability in English compared to those in year three. More of the former group also self-rated their proficiency as average, so it is perhaps not surprising they felt less satisfied with their reading ability. This brings up the issue of whether the two groups are comparable in terms of their overall English ability, and whether any differences reflect genuine changes in reading ability over the years, or simply the fact that students of average or less reading proficiency drop out before reaching the upper levels.

Students in their first year also were more likely to agree that getting good marks was a motivating factor that pushed them to study more. This is not surprising, since this year acts as a filter for the subsequent ones, and failing students must either repeat the year or leave the university. Passing or failing is thus entirely dependent on getting high marks.

This is less of an issue in the upper years, where continuous assessment has a bigger role to play, and students may be more focused on becoming good clinicians than achieving high grades.

Results Related to Self-rated Reading Ability

The third research question asked if there were differences in students' beliefs about reading according to self-rated reading proficiency (as summarized in Table 3). Students who self-rated their proficiency as average (3 or 4 on a 6-point scale) reported feeling anxious if they didn't know all the words in a reading, and thinking they were not good in English if they didn't understand a word in an English book significantly more than those of very good to excellent self-rated proficiency. They also were more likely to believe the teacher would tell them how to read and to be motivated to study more by thinking about obtaining good marks. It is not surprising that students whose language ability is less strong would feel more stressed by reading, particularly as reading in English is probably a new experience for them, at least in the quantities and depth expected for academic studies.

The fact that the average students also were more likely to agree that they read in English only because they had to for their studies may suggest they had limited chances to read English texts before they came to the university. It is interesting to note that this group also agreed more that people who can speak English well can also understand better when they read, perhaps as a result of comparing themselves to their classmates who are fluent speakers. Upper year students may have gathered more evidence that fluent speakers are not guaranteed to succeed as medical students, solely on the basis of their language fluency

and that other factors such as study habits and knowledge of science also play a role. Finally, average students were less likely to be satisfied with their level of reading ability in English, a not surprising result and an indication, perhaps, that they are aware of the relationship between excellent reading skills and success in their chosen field of study.

Study Limitations and Recommendations

Relatively a few year-one students mentioned having problems with reading, which may be due to the timing of the questionnaire administration. It was distributed at the beginning of their second term. By this time, many students had found ways of dealing with texts in English and were much more proficient readers than they had been in the first few weeks. In addition, most of the respondents were average or excellent readers, according to their own rating. The ones with the greatest problems in reading are therefore not represented in this group.

As the questionnaire was intended only as a pilot instrument for gathering information, it was administered to a small sample of the student population, representing around 20% of the total enrollment for the year. Participation was voluntary, as noted above, which means that the sample was not entirely representative, since more willing participants may well be those with more positive attitudes and beliefs. Further testing and refining of this questionnaire and administration to a more diverse population might yield a more accurate estimate of its overall validity and reliability. For example, factor analysis would have been a useful way of grouping items and establishing relationships among them. It is also important to remember that it is unlikely these items describe all the beliefs

held by any individual student. Rather, their beliefs may be regarded as variable and dependent on contextual factors and may change over time.

It should also be noted that the drawbacks noted above for questionnaire-based studies also apply to these results. That is, we cannot be certain that the statements were interpreted by the respondents in the way they were intended, or that they answered as they honestly felt, rather than as they anticipated the researcher expected or to put themselves in a good light. We cannot also be sure that the students in both years are comparable, without following up those in Year One to see the effects of further study on their reported beliefs. An examination of actual reading practices of some individual medical students as they tackle the academic reading they must master might help to shed light on whether these reported beliefs may be related to their approaches and strategies.

Conclusion

There has been relatively little research on tertiary students' reading habits and beliefs in the Gulf region, in spite of the fact that tertiary institutions have rapidly increased in the region over the past few years. Understanding how these students handle the considerable task of studying in an L2 is important to allay some of the misconceptions that may arise in these settings, particularly where instructors come from a Western academic tradition. Arab students in the Gulf region, as well as their in other Asian countries, are often characterized as rote learners, reliant on memorisation as a preferred strategy for learning. Furthermore, they are believed to depend on the teacher, and not take on responsibility for their own learning. That the students of this study strongly disagreed with memorisation without

understanding and recognized their responsibility for understanding what they read, rather than depending on the teacher, would seem to go against the stereotypical view of Arab readers.

Many of the beliefs and habits reported in this study can be considered positive, especially that students' experience and proficiency increase as they mature. They strongly support some beliefs about reading that characterize proficient readers, such as self-reliance, tolerance for ambiguity, and persistence. However, it must be noted that the reading habits and beliefs reported here are specific to a particular group of students at a particular point in their academic careers. Many characteristics make this group of students interesting: their strong motivation to succeed, their excellent school academic performance, the extensive demands on their reading ability, and their dedication to their studies.

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