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THE EFFECT OF EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND ON SECOND LANGUAGE READING

by

Hammad Ali M. Alshammari

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

The University of Memphis

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the soul of my father, who passed away January 5, 2018.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply thankful to my chair, Dr. Emily Thrush, for her guidance and support throughout the process of writing this dissertation. I would also like to thank my other committee members, without whom this work would not have been possible. To the Coordinator of Applied Linguistics, Dr. Tereasa Dalle, for her endless patience and assistance. To Dr. Joseph Jones, who helped me improve considerably through his ideas and suggestions and helped me find my voice in writing. To Dr. Rebecca Adams, for her many constructive comments and recommendations.

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Abstract

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An increasing number of studies in the field of L2 reading have found that Saudi ESL learners are more likely to encounter reading difficulties in the US (e.g., Khan, 2011), and Saudi learners have demonstrated the lowest reading scores on the TOEFL and IELTS standardized language tests worldwide (as cited in Al-Qahtani, 2016). This study explored the effects of educational background on L2 reading by interviewing eight Saudi ESL learners with different reading proficiency levels. The study followed a qualitative framework to produce detailed data. Interviews elicited the perceptions of the participants on their current and previous reading contexts to determine the possible sources of their reading difficulties. The interview questions were categorized under five main themes: 1) reading in Saudi Arabia and the US, 2) culture in Saudi Arabia and the US, 3) learning process in Saudi Arabia and the US, 4) perceptions toward reading in Saudi Arabia and the US, and 5) assessment in Saudi Arabia and the US.

Many studies, such as Hudson (2007) and Koda (2005), have shown a significant relationship between L1 and L2 reading ability. This was supported in the present study as more highly proficient L1 readers were more capable of meeting higher and unexpected reading requirements in the US, such as strategies to read quickly to compensate for having less time to prepare than in their prior reading context in Saudi Arabia. The study concludes that the orthographic distance between L1 and L2 did not play a major role in determining the L2 reading difficulties, since participants were at a more advanced reading level. The study also provides recommendations for Saudi ESL learners as well as reading instructors in Saudi Arabia and the US.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The process of second language (L2) learning requires continuous effort on the part of learners to be successful. Gaining fluency in an L2 linguistic context, however, is complicated by learners having inequivalent developmental language systems due to the first language (L1) system being already fully perceived and independently developed. Existing literature (e.g., Hudson, 2007; Koda, 2005) has noted that learning an L2 carries unique requirements dissimilar from those in L1 acquisition. One of these differences is that L2 learners have already established their L1 literacy as well as an independent linguistic identity using their L1. L2 reading demands that learners perform higher cognitive processes in the L2 to be identified as successful readers.

An issue that arises from this situation is when L1 readers are perceived as proficient based on different criteria from those required to be proficient readers in the L2. This is often the case when comparing Arabic reading proficiency in Saudi Arabia to English reading proficiency in the US. Reading may also be described differently in these two contexts. Compounding this issue is when Arabic and English reading instruction in Saudi Arabia is perceived in similar terms, meaning that students end up transferring Arabic reading proficiency expectations (which differ from English reading expectations in the US) to their English as a foreign language (EFL) context in Saudi Arabia. This insight is important in explaining possible reasons for why Saudi English as a second language (ESL) learners resist their new reading context in the US, as well as their inability to perform better in reading classes and on reading tests.

Koda (2005) defined reading as a process that aims to “construct text meaning based on visually encoded information” (p. 1). However, I have found Saudi ESL learners to have

different, sometimes problematic, definitions, which have been crystalized though a variety of factors in the Saudi context, including reading curricula, expectations of reading instructors, reading assessment, and perceptions about proficient readers. Saudi ESL learners have thus built their reading identity based on lower cognitive input (in terms of Bloom's taxonomy) that has caused them to expect similar expectations for English reading in the US, which are most often incorrect. Even if they correctly decode the writing symbols or know the meaning of some words or sentences, they still often cannot construct a broader synthesized meaning from the text. This is because they are used to viewing the act of reading as limited to academic texts, causing them to only consider meaning when reading in terms of the academic requirements of those texts. In other words, Saudi ESL learners often lack experience reading for pleasure (Al-Qahtani, 2016). As a result, they find themselves unconsciously associating reading with academic texts and follow-up questions rather than looking at the big picture.

When Saudi ESL learners start learning English in the US (in an ESL rather than EFL context), they encounter different expectations to pass reading exams. Even if reading in the US could be described using similar criteria—i.e., reading academic texts followed by answering questions related to the texts—the scope and type of questions in the two contexts are different. For example, in the US, they might be asked what they think about the authors' ideas, which is a much less common type of reading question in the Saudi context (Al-Qahtani, 2016). Generally, in Saudi Arabia, learners are more likely to be silent, especially when it comes to articulating their opinions about the authors' ideas. For this reason, Saudi ESL learners have not been encouraged to develop and present their own voices, leading to less participation or effort in reading classrooms. A US context thus requires Saudi ESL learners to increase their efforts to meet new requirements and expectations they are unprepared for.

Other dissimilarities between the underlying reading skills required in L1 and L2 acquisition could likewise put a greater burden on learners in ESL reading classes. Reading in an L1 usually comes after mastering speaking and being exposed to other linguistic input for a sufficient amount of time. In contrast, L2 learners are exposed to reading at the same time they are exposed to writing, speaking, listening, and other linguistic and non-linguistic input. Although difficulties in L2 reading can be related to learners having insufficient linguistic knowledge, the present study has sought a broader understanding of what causes learners to have L2 reading difficulties. The researcher's personal contact with Saudi ESL learners in particular revealed their having lower scores in reading sections on the TOEFL and encountering academic reading difficulty. According to the IELTS and ETS, on the TOEFL and IELTS language proficiency tests, Saudi ESL learners have had some of the lowest reading scores worldwide (as cited in Al-Qahtani, 2016).

The cognitive constructivist Piaget suggested that learning is a developmental process with new knowledge built on previous knowledge (as cited in Brown, 2000). In this vein, the current study has sought to determine the perceptions of L2 learners toward their current and previous experience in different contexts, with the two contexts being their L1 reading experience in Saudi Arabia and their L2 reading experience in the US. The scope of the study goes beyond Cummins' (1979) linguistic interdependence hypothesis, where L1 literacy skills can be positively transferred to the L2 process. This hypothesis suggests that learners with better reading strategies in the L1 could also be better in the L2, meaning they can benefit from previously learned literacy skills. However, L2 reading as reported by Saudi ESL learners requires them to modify what they know about reading in their L1. The problem lies in needing to meet different expectations as well as adjusting to dissimilar concepts. In addition, reading

instruction for Arabic or English in Saudi Arabia is clearly different from reading instruction in the US in terms of pedagogy and teacher expectations (Al-Qahtani, 2016).

Most studies have formed an incomplete picture when looked at reading difficulties of L2 learners. Such difficulties should be reported directly by learners after they have achieved a certain level of proficiency. As far as I know, however, the field of L2 reading lacks any studies exploring the reading difficulties of Saudi ESL learners based on their own perceptions or that associate such difficulties to learners' educational background. The purpose of doing this is to determine what caused delays in meeting the expectations of the ESL reading context and what caused Saudi ESL learners to have lower scores in their L2 reading.

This study anticipated that ESL learners would have different expectations for L2 reading since they had already built their L1 linguistic identity and literacy skills. It hypothesized that learners would carry over their L1 understanding of what reading is and what proficient readers need to do to be successful in an L2 content. Since people often judge a new idea based on prior knowledge, it was anticipated that Saudi ESL learners would evaluate their L2 reading according to how they perceived their L1 reading. However, what would happen when the expectations of L2 reading instructors or reading assessment differ from the L1 context? To improve learners' L2 reading performance and success, the present study has analyzed their perceptions about their different reading experiences.

According to Hudson (2007) and Koda (2005), L2 reading is far more complex than reading in the L1. It is a mysterious cognitive act that demands macro and micro levels of cognitive processes to comprehend a given text. L2 reading cannot be investigated thoroughly if viewed independently from L1 knowledge, as a growing body of literature in the L2 field has suggested that L2 readers invoke their previous knowledge when interacting with L2 texts to

construct meaning (Butler, 2014). This recall process can facilitate L2 reading or make it more difficult, depending on similarities and dissimilarities between the two languages. From the schema perspective, readers show continuous interaction with written discourse based on their constructed worldview. As a result, meaning is not located in the text but rather constructed through interaction between the text and the reader's knowledge. This means that different readers can interpret the same text differently based on their preexisting content, formal, and language knowledge (Butler, 2014).

Hudson (2007) described two traditional views about L2 reading in terms of whether it has been primarily influenced by previous L1 reading. Some have argued that poor reading proficiency in the L2 is associated with poor reading skills in the L1, while others have argued that poor L2 reading proficiency is associated primarily with insufficient L2 knowledge (Hudson, 2007). Based on these opposing viewpoints, Hudson suggested two hypotheses: 1) poor L2 reading is caused by poor L1 reading ability, and poor L1 readers will be poor readers in the L2 and 2) poor L2 reading is caused by inadequate L2 knowledge. Hudson then proposed modifications to these hypotheses: 1) poor L2 reading is due to ineffective L2 reading strategies that differ from reading strategies in the L1 and 2) poor L2 reading is due to the inability to employ L1 reading strategies; because of limited L2 knowledge, good readers in the L1 will be good readers in the L2 once they reach a certain proficiency level in the L2.

Through looking at Arabic-speaking ESL learners, it is apparent that when they read in English, they depend on their previously learned L1 reading strategies (Shaw & McMillion, 2008). They often unconsciously resist new L2 English strategies that would help them fully comprehend what they read. In addition, L1 linguistic features, such as orthographic differences or similarities, can also have an influence on L2 reading.

Due to the linguistic and pedagogical differences described above, it is important to understand the cumulative underlying reasons for why some L2 learners encounter difficulties during L2 reading based on their personal interpretation of different experiences. The current study has thus paid greater attention to Saudi ESL learners' educational background to find reasons for why they are often less proficient in reading English. Al-Qahtani (2016) found that English learners in Saudi Arabia had poor reading skills due to their educational background. He proposed reasons for this based on interviews and surveys of intermediate school students, English teachers, and school administrators. In contrast, the current study has examined the perceptions of highly and less proficient Saudi ESL students who had experienced differing reading contexts.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to understand how Saudi ESL learners perceive their experiences in Saudi Arabia and the US to determine whether their prior education played a negative role in their current L2 reading. Primarily, the study has explored whether Saudi students encountered reading difficulties related to their prior education in Saudi Arabia that influenced their English reading in the US. When Saudi learners have been exposed to ESL in the US, they have generally reported encountering constant reading difficulties and lacked sufficient reading skills that would help them attain higher scores in the reading sections of the TOEFL. Some personal contacts of the researcher also reported carrying their L1 reading identity over to reading in the new L2 context (the US), finding a clear disconnect between the two in terms of instructor expectations, teaching approaches, reading assessment, and the way they perceived proficient readers.

This disconnect between L1 and L2 expectations might be the source of learners' difficulties in the L2 reading context. It might also cause Saudi ESL learners to resist assuming a new reading identity, which comprises teaching approaches, instructor expectations, and reading assessment methods that differ from their L1 context. Although there is undoubtedly some transfer of underlying reading skills, personal contacts with Saudi ESL learners revealed that the most important issue is not the possibility of transferring literacy skills but rather different perceptions about reading in different contexts. However, shedding light on transferable reading skills could still increase L2 reading improvement. Shaw and McMillion (2008) suggested that language skills, especially reading skills, could be positively transferred from the L1 in a way that facilitated L2 reading and that, as suggested by the linguistic interdependence hypothesis, better L2 readers could be expected to be better L1 readers. Various studies have examined this issue, but none have focused on the effect of Saudi educational background on ESL reading according to the perspectives of highly and less proficient readers. This study has sought to understand the difficulties that can cause Saudi ESL learners to have lower reading performance in English.

Statement of the Problem

L2 reading performance is a complex phenomenon complicated by various processes and factors that need to be accounted for and explained. One important factor is the background knowledge the L2 reader brings from the L1. Although a good understanding of grammar and vocabulary helps readers comprehend what they read (Brevik, Olsen, & Hellekjær, 2016), the present study looked at broader reading difficulties that Saudi ESL learners brought from their educational background. The research problem was revealed from personal communication with Saudi ESL learners, as most of them encountered difficulties taking reading tests, especially

standardized tests measuring English proficiency, such as the TOEFL. Although standardized language tests usually have four sections (reading, listening, speaking, and writing), Saudi ESL learners most frequently get their lower scores in the reading section (Grabe, 2014).

Such low scores might be caused by inadequate development of reading skills in the L1, as Cummins proposed, rather than by insufficient English proficiency, since learners more often get higher scores in listening, speaking, and writing (as cited in Han, 2015). However, the present study focused on how L2 learners perceived their prior reading instruction, which could cause them some delay in meeting the expectations of reading goals in the US. As gleaned from personal contacts with Saudi ESL learners, the main issue is not a lack of reading strategies but rather that they transfer their view of L1 or EFL reading to the ESL classroom, leading to their having reading criteria that do not match the ESL context.

Research Questions

This study explored the effects of educational background on Saudi ESL learners' reading experience by answering the following questions:

1. What are Saudi ESL learners' experiences with L1 and L2 reading in the US, and what reading difficulties do they report?
2. To what extent does educational background affect learners' performance in L2 reading comprehension?
3. Are there differences in L1 and L2 experiences and difficulties reported by more and less proficient ESL readers?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter gives an overview of studies and concepts related to the role of the L1 on L2 reading. It introduces some difficulties with teaching English reading in Saudi Arabia and topics related to the field of L2 reading. It also describes differences between Arabic and English that could affect Saudi ESL learners and cause them to have low English reading performance.

A growing body of literature has explored the effects of prior education in the L1 on L2 learning (e.g., Artieda, 2017; Ke & Chan, 2017; Kim, Liu, & Cao, 2017; Wu, 2016). Some learners fail to shift from the assumptions of their past learning experience into their new learning context due to differences between the two contexts and a disconnect between what they learned and what they intend to learn. For example, in the present study, ESL learners had often built a reading identity different from the reading identity in the new context. Even if the L2 learners try to employ active reading strategies, they still tend to be lacking in the new context in terms of what the reading is and what expectations they should meet, causing them to create a hybrid reading identity. This chapter therefore sheds light on studies related to reading difficulties that Saudi ESL learners usually have as well as studies related to L2 reading.

L2 Reading

The main topic of the present study—i.e., the relationship between background knowledge and L2 reading—has been extensively investigated. Such studies have largely been carried out with adults, with very few focusing on children (Levine & Haus, 2005). When the L1 and L2 have similarities, this can be referred to as a degree of simplicity, while major differences can cause enormous difficulties. Past studies have affirmed that the L1 can have an influence on L2 acquisition, and some have proposed that reading in the L2 requires greater effort than that

used during L1 reading (e.g., Koda, 2005). In addition, some factors can play a more effective role in L2 reading than major factors affecting L1 reading (Durgunoglu & Hancin-Bhatt, 1992; Jiang, 2011; Kaushanskaya, Yoo, & Marian, 2011), and learners often employ their L1 in formulating L2 reading strategies (Akamatsu, 1999). Scholars have thus devoted a considerable amount of time demystifying the inter-relations between L1 and L2 (e.g., Khan, 2016; Mehrabi, 2014).

Role of L1 Experience and Education in L2 Learning

Different studies have found variations in L1 reading capabilities and understanding. Jiang (2011), for example, found that the contribution made by the L1 on individuals' L2 learning was approximately 14–21%. In addition, that study indicated that the contribution of L2 expertise could be as high as 30% in L2 reading capabilities. However, difficulties have arisen when researchers have dealt with languages that lack alphabetic writing. Normally, individuals with a sufficient educational background in their L1 can use learned strategies to improve their L2 proficiency. In spite of this supposition, it has not been shown that L1 skills can be transferred for all learners (Jiang, 2011). For example, it can be hard to use Arabic reading strategies when learning English. One issue is that learners can face an uphill battle in comprehending lower vs. uppercase letters in English (Jiang, 2011). In particular, Jiang cited orthographic distance between the L1 and L2 as a major cause of difficulty, which is crucial when evaluating the performance of L2 speakers. In learning English, people from regions using an alphabetic system (e.g., Spanish, Korean, and Indonesian) have an advantage over those who speak languages not written in an alphabet, such as Japanese and Chinese (Jiang, 2011). From this overview, it is apparent that the type of orthographic system employed by the L1 is imperative in understanding the effect of the L1 on L2 reading.

Saudi ESL learners often experience a disconnect in the skills and expectations required to read in their L1 and L2 as well as in their prior and current contexts. It is important to note that such learners have often had prior exposure to English in an EFL (rather than an ESL) context, meaning they have passed through several reading stages, including L1 reading, L2 reading in an EFL context, and L2 reading in an ESL context. It is thus usually ineffective to only look at reading difficulties in the L1 and associate them to what learners experience in an ESL context, as they have normally been exposed to English in Saudi Arabia, and for this reason, all reading experiences (L1, EFL, and ESL) should be taken into account to reach more valid conclusions. An important difference between L1 and L2 reading is that readers approach L2 reading with a dual language system. This supports Cummings' argument that academic proficiency is transferred across languages such that learners who have developed literacy in their L1 tend to make strong progress in reading the L2 (as cited in Nosarti, Mechelli, Green, & Price, 2009). Nosarti et al. found that L1 literacy accounted for over 20% of a learner's L2 reading capacity.

Derakhshan and Karimi (2015) found that learners began to understand how to read in the L2 when they comprehended word-for-word translations, and when learners read in the L2, they tended to rely on their L1 structures. However, when a large number of errors were found in L1 structures, it was probable that L2 reading could be impaired, demonstrating that the L1 can interact with the L2. They categorized errors found when learning an L2 in different ways. First are developmental errors, which in many cases cannot be linked with one's L1. Second are ambiguous mistakes, which comprise developmental and interference errors. Moreover, unique errors can be registered and experts found it difficult to know whether they were a result of developmental or interference errors.

Several studies have established the role played by L1 background on L2 acquisition (e.g., Kaushanskaya et al., 2011). Ideally, it has been suggested that the development of L2 phonological inventory, literacy abilities, lexical skills, and grammatical competencies is dependent on L1 skills. In fact, Saudi learners find it difficult to master a large vocabulary, and it has been indicated that vocabulary-related skills are better when dealing with monolinguals than bilinguals (Kaushanskaya et al., 2011). For instance, Kaushanskaya et al. asserted that bilingual people were slower when required to observe and name pictures. The same challenge is not uncommon when dealing with individuals who converse using a single language. Specifically, few studies have focused on revealing the relationship between L1 and L2 vocabulary mastery. Despite this, Khan (2016) affirmed that individuals possessing strong L1 vocabulary skills found it easier to master complex L2 words and phrases. That study indicated a connection between the number of vocabulary words one knew in the L1 and the breadth of vocabulary in the L2. In contrast, other studies have suggested that there is no significant relationship between L1 and L2 vocabulary skills (Khan, 2016).

According to the linguistic interdependence hypothesis, L1 background and literacy are the foundation of L2 reading (Rubin, 1994). There are various similarities between L1 and L2 reading that are interdependent. Therefore, when students are literate in their L1, they are believed to develop their knowledge in L2 reading based on their L1 literacy. Numerous studies (e.g., Hudson, 2007; Koda, 2005) have shown a significant relationship between reading in the L1 and L2. Additionally, the literacy skills developed in one language largely predict the corresponding skills in reading in the L2 (Han, 2015). Han supported the linguistic interdependence hypothesis, arguing that there is an important relationship between education background in the L1 and L2 reading, as learners with better L1 reading performance more

frequently had better L2 reading performance. L1 reading was demonstrated to be more important than the various aspects of the L2. A study conducted in Saudi Arabia indicated that L1 reading was a substantial factor in developing English skills (Rubin, 1994). Cummins' (1979) hypothesis concluded that L1 and L2 reading skills are interdependent manifestations of a mutual underlying proficiency.

Cummins first proposed the interdependence hypothesis in 1978, asserting that it was possible for individuals to transfer different aspects of their L1 to an L2 during the learning process (Vrooman, 2000). Specifically, the linguistic skills that young learners acquired in the L1 determined how they read in the L2. As a result, educational environment is influential in the development of the interdependence hypothesis. This theory can thus be helpful in explaining why Saudi learners in the US encounter problems when reading in English due to variations in linguistic skills acquired during childhood.

According to Hill and Liu (2012), discipline domain specific (DDS) background knowledge plays an important role in L2 academic reading. These and other researchers have found DDS knowledge to be significant and have a positive impact, and when such an effect has been identified, it has been found to enhance reading comprehension among L2 learners. Most such researchers have investigated the effect of linguistic competence and language proficiency together with the effect of background knowledge on ESL reading (Butler, 2014). For example, Hill and Liu (2012) found that among 120 Arabic-speaking undergraduate students in the US, DDS background knowledge together with L1 language proficiency predicted reading scores for academic texts. In another study, English knowledge was weighted 1.8 to 3 times more than background knowledge in L2 reading comprehension (Vandergrift, 2007). Hill and Liu (2012) also investigated the effect of background knowledge on an engineering reading comprehension

test between non-engineering and engineering students. The group comprised native English speakers (US students) and nonnative English speakers (Saudi students taking undergraduate course in the US). The results showed that native English speakers performed better than Saudi students. In another study, engineering students performed better than their non-engineering counterparts did (Vandergrift, 2007).

L2s are learned in a variety of environments; for example, one can use different words and phrases when shopping, eating at a restaurant, reading street signs, and doing classroom activities. Despite the challenge of using language in such varied situations, individuals with a desire to learn an L2 often seek mastery in that language (Bhela, 1999). Unfortunately, progress is hindered by various factors, such as L1-L2 structural differences, so it is common for learners to use their L1 when organizing their thoughts to produce an L2 response (Bhela, 1999). This use of the L1 in turn leads to speakers creating their own rules for the L2. Scholars have attempted to explain such L1 interference when one is learning and applying an L2 (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). Bhela's (1999) study, for example, suggested that interference was a result of learner perceptions and was supported by their stage of L2 development. When learners make improvised rules while reading in the L2, they believe that applying some L1 rules can be helpful in mastering the L2 by transferring their L1 expertise (Bhela, 1999; Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). This error is common and can be attributed to learners' inability to realize when they are making mistakes. Such errors are likely to occur for a long period, especially when one does not understand what to do instead (Bhela, 1999).

This kind of interference has been attributed to different habits and patterns associated with the L1. Derakhshan and Karimi (2015) stated that to avoid such interference, learners must change those patterns when they begin learning an L2. According to them, students enrolled in

L2 classes tend to transfer L1 culture, structures, and meaning when reading in the L2. However, when acquiring L2 patterns, they are likely to assimilate mistakes found in the L1. As a result, these researchers indicated that when one has difficulties in vocabulary, phonology, and grammar when learning an L2, they can be associated with L1 habits. Studies support that very few L2 learners attain native-level proficiency (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). Derakhshan and Karimi categorized language transfer as positive or negative due to the resulting influence on the L2. In positive transfer, L1 capabilities allow learners to acquire the L2 and boost their writing and reading comprehension. However, in negative transfer, the L1 presents interference when acquiring the L2. The second type is common when individuals have L1 habits that lead them to commit errors in the L2.

Furthermore, researchers have argued that L2 learning is similar to acquiring an L1 (e.g., Bhela, 1999). Oftentimes, one can be reading a passage in the L2 but start responding in the L1. In many instances, learning the L1 and L2 in a similar setting has been shown to be problematic. Instead, experts have advised that the two be learned in a distinct manner and environment (Bhela, 1999; Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). Furthermore, L2 learners should ensure they can understand the structures of the L2 and avoid mixing them with those of the L1. Additionally, when one has various interference habits from the L1, these can surface when reading in the L2, resulting in issues with students' grammar, vocabulary, and phonology. In the event one has major reading problems in the L1, they will likely be transferred to the L2 (Bhela, 1999). Languages that have similar structures are prone to high levels of interference. Difficulties that are faced in L2 reading can force learners to switch to the L1 when they no longer comprehend sentences. Moreover, errors made when using the L2 can often be traced back to the L1

(Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). It is thus clear that interference is a major aspect of L2 learning and should be addressed adequately in the literature and in practice.

Nevertheless, many studies have failed to cover certain issues related to ESL learners' attitudes toward reading (Yamashita, 2004). The approach employed by L2 learners is vital given that it influences their performance. Yamashita stated that L1 reading abilities are usually transferred to similar L2 exercises, and L1 reading capabilities can be transferred to individuals when their L2 proficiency is at a desirable level when contrasted with a given linguistic threshold. Various models have examined the process and product of reading. The product of reading describes the level of comprehension attained depending on individuals' reading abilities (Yamashita, 2004). This aspect can be evaluated through different methods, such as reading tests. The process of reading is effective when suitable reading strategies are employed by L2 readers (Yamashita, 2004). Certain proficiency levels have to be achieved before L2 readers can read well compared to native speakers. Reading attitude has been described as a detailed theoretical construct, and the state of mind among L2 readers is a fundamental aspect of reading (Akbari, Ghonsooly, Ghazanfari, & Shahriari, 2017). Attitude can be defined based on conative, affective, and cognitive factors (Sabatin, 2013).

Saudi Educational Context

English proficiency has become important in Saudi Arabia, and employers are demanding that new workers understand how to communicate in English (Al-Nasser, 2015; Levine & Haus, 2005). The country's Ministry of Education has a mandate to ensure that educational standards are followed. In the Saudi education system, it is compulsory to study English from Grade 4 to the university level. In spite of this, various challenges face Saudi EFL learners (Al-Nasser,

2015). For example, individuals used to speaking in their L1 (Arabic) find it hard to learn English (Al-Nasser, 2015).

A related issue is how Arabic and English are distinct in various ways. Arabic has a cursive writing system, for instance, while English does not tend to use cursive writing anymore. In addition, Arabic has some unique phonetic and phonological rules different from English phonology. For example, equivalents of the English phonemes /p/ and /v/ are not attested in Arabic. Furthermore, numerous phonological rules are specific to one language or the other, such as the allowance of onset clusters, as Arabic does not allow onset clusters (bi-segments) in a syllable, whereas English does allow them as well as three-segment onsets, as in /tʃɹaɪ/ 'try,' and even four-segment onsets, as in /stɹi:t/ 'street.' These differences also extend to morphology, syntax, and other areas of language.

Acquisition of English in Saudi Arabia has also encountered non-linguistic difficulties in the way the language can reflect a more Western identity, and it is hindered by some beliefs that stress the importance of preserving the local culture. Since the Quran was written in Classical Arabic, it carries great religious significance (Al-Nasser, 2015). As a result, the Saudi Government has been forced to provide extra motivation for L2 learners to acquire English. Other difficulties experienced by L2 students and instructors include a poorly developed curriculum. Normally, English curricula in Saudi Arabia are not well revised, with major translations dependent on L1 methods (Al-Nasser, 2015). Furthermore, teachers in Saudi Arabia are not highly trained in linguistics, and studies have indicated that the teaching strategies adopted by tutors are outdated (e.g., Droop & Verhoeven, 1998). These factors help explain why Saudi Arabia lags behind in English acquisition and what can be done to change this trend.

It is important to note that sociocultural theory, as explained by Vygotsky (1896-1943), has a key impact on explaining reading abilities of individuals, such as Saudi ESL learners. As in many societies, people learning an L2 are often largely unassisted. Cultural settings play a crucial role in ensuring that people develop higher cognitive abilities (Sabatin, 2013; Turuk, 2008). In positive settings, learners can acquire knowledge to solve problems. During early childhood, individuals are dependent on others for assistance. Toddlers, for instance, imitate the actions of others, which allows them to develop new skills (Turuk, 2008). With this in mind, parents are the main agents through which culture is passed from one generation to another. This factor is especially important for this context as Saudi culture differs from many other societies. It values Arabic for its religious significance and as the language used for administrative purposes throughout the Middle East (Shah, 2008). According to Shah, Arabic is seen as a source of national identity, so everyone has to learn it. Arabic is thus more esteemed in Saudi Arabia than other secondary languages. This society therefore probably does not provide a favorable learning environment for L2 acquisition, which could explain why Saudi learners face so many difficulties learning an L2 (Vandergrift, 2007).

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter explains the theoretical framework, research questions, participants, instrument, procedures, data collection, and data analysis of the present study. The study collected all data from participants through interviews. This methodology was chosen because qualitative studies generally emphasize a holistic view from lived experience and see development as context-situated (Koda, 2005). That is, development is contextualized in the primary language (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

The theoretical underpinning of this study was the linguistic interdependence hypothesis regarding reading (see Cummins, 1979). It emphasizes that L1 knowledge can be a criterion for developing L2 knowledge. In other words, students tend to transfer learning habits into many different L2 situations. From this premise, it could be argued that researchers might be closer to understanding the impact of L1 knowledge interference on students' L2 reading development (Grabe, 2014). This perspective could also help understand Saudi students' reading difficulties better than other perspectives, such as the connectionism model or the threshold hypothesis. Connectionism is based on computer stimulations of human cognition to explain cumulative knowledge processed in associative units, which seems to be a reductionist approach (Fitzgerald, 1995). The threshold hypothesis, although it considers the possible impact of prior knowledge on L2 reading, gives more importance to the role of L2 proficiency in reading development. That is, it could be seen as being reductionist as well.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What are Saudi ESL learners' experiences with L1 and L2 reading in the US, and what reading difficulties do they report?
2. To what extent does educational background affect learners' performance in L2 reading comprehension?
3. Are there differences in L1 and L2 experiences and difficulties reported by more and less proficient ESL readers?

Participants

The eight participants of this study consisted of male Saudi native-Arabic-speaking students studying at universities in the US, with ages ranging from 20 to 35. They were divided based on their reading levels in the L1 and L2. As their L1 was Arabic, the reading test used to categorize them in their L1 was Qiyas, a standardized test administered by the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education, while their reading level in English was determined through the interpretation scale from the TOEFL, a standardized language proficiency test operated by the ETS company. The score interpretation was based on the ETS (n.d.) website. According to that scale, test takers who score 0-14 in reading are identified as having a low reading level, 15-21 as intermediate, and 22-30 as high. For simplicity, this study grouped participants with percentages to show their matching scores in both reading contexts (L1 and L2). For example, participants who were moderately proficient in reading would receive a percentage of 50–70%, while participants categorized as highly proficient in reading would fall between 71% and 100%. The formula used to obtain these percentages was to multiply the test taker scores in reading sections and then divide them by the highest score (30). Participants' scores in both tests and their resulting reading proficiency classification are presented in Table 1.

To find participants, I first contacted SACM, asking for Saudi students in linguistics programs (MA or PhD), at least one in each university. Illinois, Tennessee, Indiana, and Missouri were targeted because those states were closer to me. When I received at least one email from each university, I contacted students about their willingness to participate. More participants agreed to participate than were necessary for this study. Then, I asked those able to participate about their reading levels in Arabic based on Qiyas, as well as their reading levels in English based on TOEFL. This process resulted in four participants at a highly proficient reading level and four at a moderately proficient reading level.

Table 1

Participant Test Scores and Reading Proficiency

Participant	Qiyas	TOEFL (reading section)	Reading Proficiency
1	73%	73.33%	High
2	79%	83.33%	High
3	91%	93.33%	High
4	82%	86.66%	High
5	65%	66.66%	Moderate
6	51%	50.00%	Moderate
7	59%	60.00%	Moderate
8	68%	56.66%	Moderate

Participant 1 completed his education through high school in Ha'il and joined Ha'il University to obtain his BA in English. He later worked as a teaching assistant at the same university for less than two years before moving to the US to pursue an MA in Linguistics at Indiana University Bloomington. He did remedial English in the Intensive English Program for less than three months before starting his program. He was categorized as a highly proficient reader with a Qiyas score of 73% and TOEFL score of 73.33%.

Participant 2 completed all schooling through high school in Arar and obtained a BA in English at Northern Borders University. After graduating, he moved to New Zealand for three

months to study English but moved back to Saudi Arabia for a couple months. Then, he moved to the US to pursue his MA in Applied Linguistics at Indiana State University. He studied remedial English in the Intensive English Program for a couple of months before entering his program. He reported scores in Qiyas of 79% and TOEFL of 83.33%, so he was categorized as a highly proficient reader.

Participant 3 finished all schooling through high school in Al-Jouf and obtained a BA in English at Al-Jouf University. After graduating, he taught in public schools for almost three years before working as a teaching assistant at Al-Jouf University for less than a year. Then, he moved to Indiana State University to pursue an MA in Applied Linguistics. He did not need to do any remedial English as he met the language requirements to enter the program. He was categorized as a highly proficient reader due to his Qiyas (91%) and TOEFL (93.33%) scores.

Participant 4 completed elementary and most intermediate schooling in Riyadh and the third year of intermediate school as well as high school in a private school in Hafr-Albatin (note that in Saudi Arabia, elementary school comprises Grades 1–6, intermediate school Grades 7–9, and high school grades 10–12). He studied at the University of Dammam for one semester before withdrawing and going to King Saud University in Riyadh, where he obtained his BA in Translation. After graduating, he moved to the US to pursue an MA in Linguistics at Indiana University Bloomington. He was categorized as a highly proficient reader based on his Qiyas (82%) and TOEFL (86.66%) scores.

Participant 5 completed his elementary, intermediate, and high school education in Al-Jouf, where he later completed a BA in English at Al-Jouf University. Afterward, he started his MA in Linguistics at Indiana University Bloomington. Before starting this program, he studied remedial English in the Intensive English Program at the same university for 14 months. He was

categorized as a moderately proficient reader due to his Qiyas (65%) and TOEFL (66.66%) scores.

Participant 6 finished elementary school in Jeddah before moving with his family to Arar to complete his intermediate, high school, and undergraduate studies. He graduated from the University of Arar with a BA in English. Two years later, he moved to the US to pursue an MA in Applied Linguistics at Southern Illinois University. He studied remedial English for less than a year in the Center for English as a Second Language at the same university and was categorized as a moderately proficient reader due to his reporting a Qiyas score of 51% and TOEFL score of 50%.

Participant 7 completed all grades through high school in Al-Qurayyat. After graduating from high school, he moved to Riyadh to complete his undergraduate studies in English at King Saud University. After graduating, he taught English for less than two years and moved to the US to pursue an MA in ESL at the University of Memphis. He was categorized as a moderately proficient reader as he reported scores of 59% in Qiyas and 60% in TOEFL.

Participant 8 did most of his elementary schooling (Grades 1-5) in Sakaka before moving to Rafha to complete the rest of elementary school (Grade 6), intermediate school, and two out of three years of high school. He moved back to Sakaka to complete the third year of high school. He obtained a BA in English from Al-Jouf University and then taught English at a private school for less than a year. After that, he moved to the US to pursue his MA in Applied Linguistics at Southern Illinois University. He did remediate work in the Center for English as a Second Language there for about a year and was categorized as a moderately proficient reader due to his scores in Qiyas (68%) and TOEFL (56.66%).

As shown above, Participants 1–4 were highly proficient in reading, while Participants 5–8 were moderately proficient. By design, all had studied reading at Saudi as well as US universities. Highly and moderately proficient ESL readers were selected as these two groups were expected to have different experiences that could be compared. However, highly proficient readers were also given greater emphasis in the results and discussion as they had richer experience to reflect on their learning development.

Instrument

To establish how reading comprehension might have been influenced by background knowledge, the eight participants were interviewed using the interview protocol (see Appendix A). All questions were asked in Arabic to ensure they understood the questions and could respond by saying exactly what they wanted to say.

Procedures

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The participants were asked at the beginning of March 2018 to participate. Their reading proficiency was self-reported, with participants divided into two groups: four moderately proficient and four highly proficient ESL readers. Moderately proficient readers were determined based on getting a score of 15-21 (out of 30) in TOEFL reading sections, or 50-70 out of 100.

Prior to the interviews, participants were notified that their identity would be protected and that responses would be coded with numbers (Participants 1–8) rather than using their names. All participants signed a consent form after agreeing to participate in the study. All interview questions were assigned to be completed in one hour for each participant. Since the interviews were semi-structured, some extra time was given if needed to guarantee best results and detailed responses. No responses will be used in any other studies and all responses were

destroyed after completing the study. The researcher traveled to the participants' locations in the US to conduct the interviews, including Southern Illinois University, Indiana State University, Indiana University Bloomington, and the University of Memphis. Interview questions were asked in Arabic to maintain the validity of the results. The researcher later translated the interview responses into English.

Data Collection

In alignment with the theoretical framework and purpose of this study, interviews were used. Although similar studies tend to employ more than one method, with specific topics it is still reasonable to employ interviewing as a solitary method to achieve an in-depth understanding of participants' reading difficulties and learning experiences in two academic contexts. It was anticipated that there might be a need to interview some participants more than once depending on the emergent themes (Nosarti et al., 2009). Repeating the interview process is sometimes important to increase the researcher's understanding in case of differing experiences surfacing among participants; however, follow-up interviews were ultimately unnecessary in this study.

All participants were interviewed independently. Each was given enough time to respond to the questions to ensure they gave valid information concerning their experience in L2 reading. The entire interview process took eight hours since each participant was interviewed for about one hour. The interviews took place on the campuses of the universities where participants were studying, specifically in student centers at Indiana University Bloomington (Participants 1, 4, and 5), Indiana State University (Participants 2–3), Southern Illinois University (Participants 6 and 8), and the University of Memphis (Participant 7).

Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected data was centered on the main principles of the linguistic interdependence hypothesis. The data were analyzed using qualitative methods and presented within a thematic framework. The results are presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter presents the participants' responses to the interview questions using a comprehensive thematic methodology under the categories of reading in Saudi Arabia and the US, culture in Saudi Arabia and the US, learning process in Saudi Arabia and the US, perceptions toward reading in Saudi Arabia and the US, and assessment in Saudi Arabia and the US. Responses to each question are grouped together, so responses to the first question are presented first, followed by responses to the second question and so on. Responses from participants with higher reading proficiency are presented first, followed by the responses of those with moderate reading proficiency, with a brief conclusion to summarize the responses to each question. Participants are identified through codes; Participants 1-4 were highly proficient readers, while Participants 5-8 were moderately proficient readers. Thus, when Participant 1 reports something, this finding refers to a highly proficient reader, and if Participant 5 reports something, it refers to a moderately proficient reader.

Reading in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 1

The first interview question in this category was "Describe a reading lesson in Saudi Arabia and the US." Participants with higher proficiency showed little variety in their responses. They agreed about certain procedures that were usually followed in both contexts. They reported that reading instructors in Saudi Arabia frequently asked students to read a text silently. All four highly proficient participants reported being given about five min to read silently. For example, Participant 1 said, "We were always given five min," while Participant 2 said, "We were given some time to read the passage, let's say five min." Participant 3 said that "A reading lesson in Saudi Arabia always starts with reading silently," and when the researcher asked about the time

usually given for this silent reading, Participant 3 said, “About five min.” Moreover, Participant 4 reported instructors always starting the reading lesson in Saudi Arabia by asking students to read silently: “As far as I remember, reading lessons in Saudi Arabia always start with directing students to read silently for a couple min.”

Reading instructors in Saudi Arabia are more likely to be the sole source of information in class, and students usually depend on instructors to get information. This was the case according to all four highly proficient readers, as they reported that instructors would translate unknown words into Arabic. For example, Participant 1 said, “After reading silently, we ask the instructor to translate some words.” Participant 2 said, “Instructors usually write the new words on the board and we copy them in our notebook.” Participant 3 gave a slightly different response: “I never asked reading instructors to translate new words, because I already had a private teacher who usually did this for me.” When I asked him about what he meant by “private teacher,” he said, “An instructor who teaches me English at home.” I asked him what levels he was in when he had this private tutor, and he said, “From elementary to college level, except for Grade 5.” In other words, he was dependent on his own effort to learn English and prepare for leading lessons only in Grade 5. I asked why he did not have a tutor in Grade 5, and he said, “Because of the war,” referring to the Gulf War in 1990. Similar to the others, Participant 4 said, “Teachers are the only source of information” and that “reading instructors translate new vocabulary words and ask us to memorize them.” He also mentioned that “Reading lessons in Saudi Arabia are boring.”

These four participants reported that reading lessons in Saudi Arabia have a demotivating effect on students since the instructor is the only source of information. Also, students are more frequently marginalized, as reported by Participant 2: “We were just sitting there looking to reading instructors to tell us what to write, what to read, what to do to pass exams.” They

reported that reading lessons in Saudi Arabia also required a large amount of memorization.

According to Participant 3, “To get an A in reading in Saudi Arabia, I’d have to memorize many answers, many corrected responses, and a large amount of passages and texts.”

Overall, these responses showed that reading lessons in Saudi Arabia started with students reading silently, followed by translating new vocabulary words, voluntarily reading passages aloud once or twice for the rest of the class, then answering questions that followed a passage. Although Participant 3 did not mention reading aloud once or twice for the rest of the class, he did report that reading lessons in Saudi Arabia usually started with asking students to read silently, followed by asking about words they did not know and answering questions, with the last part usually reserved for reading instructors writing the correct answers on the board and asking student to copy them into their books.

When describing reading lessons in the US, these four participants reported that reading instructors usually expected students to be prepared in advance and that reading lessons had expectations and structures different from those in Saudi Arabia. They indicated that reading lessons in the US had higher expectations and required more academic effort. As stated by Participant 2, “In the US, we’re expected to read more than what we were asked to read,” while Participant 3 said, “Most of the time in the US, we have to discuss the author’s ideas in reading lessons,” and Participant 4 said, “During my study in Saudi Arabia, I was able to get high grades in reading lessons only through memorizing, which has never happened in the US.”

The other four participants, who were moderately proficient readers, reported responses similar to the four highly proficient readers. For example, Participant 5 stated, “Reading lessons in Saudi Arabia usually start with reading silently, but I have not seen this in the US,” and Participant 6 said, “We, as students in Saudi Arabia, depend on reading instructors to direct us,

tell us what information to memorize for the exam, and translate new vocabulary.” Participant 7 reported that “Reading lessons in the US are different from reading lessons in Saudi Arabia. All the elements are different [...] we could call it surface vs. deep.” This participant pointed out that reading lessons in Saudi Arabia only looked at surface meaning, while those in the US were associated with examining the deeper meaning of a text. Participant 8 claimed that reading in the US frequently required students to be prepared, whereas reading lessons in Saudi Arabia could be handled without showing much prior effort or preparation.

In conclusion, the eight participants reported that reading lessons in Saudi Arabia differ from the US. They described reading lessons in Saudi Arabia as starting with reading silently for about five min, followed by asking one or two volunteers to read the assigned text out loud. Reading instructors would then translate any unknown words into Arabic and write them on the board. They would also ask for volunteers to answer the questions that usually followed the assigned readings. In the US, however, the situation was different, as reading lessons started with brief conversations about the weather or trips to establish a comfortable learning environment. This would be followed by grouping students randomly, with each group responsible for working collaboratively to answer questions based on the assigned readings.

Reading in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 2

The second question in this category was “What is the role of the teacher in Saudi Arabia and the US?” Responses of highly and moderately proficient readers were similar. Both proficiency groups reported that the role of reading instructors in Saudi Arabia tended to be directing students, whereas in the US they tended to be facilitators. Participant 1 reported, for instance, that “Reading instructors in Saudi Arabia direct, and in the US, they facilitate.” Participant 2 said, “Reading instructors in Saudi Arabia are simply everything; they omit or add

pages to the reading syllabus, where I haven't experienced such things in the US." Participant 3 claimed that "In Saudi Arabia, reading instructors have greater authority than reading instructors in the US." It was also reported that Saudi reading instructors should be a role model for students, as Participant 4 said, "Reading instructors in Saudi Arabia are expected to reflect good morals inside and outside the classroom, which is not necessary for reading instructors in the US."

Both proficiency groups also reported that most students were marginalized in the Saudi classroom because of the central role of the teacher. Participants 5–7 reported that students in Saudi Arabia were "marginalized" most of the time and only followed instructions without any consideration of their voice. They also mostly agreed that in the US, they were surprised when they were asked to voice their opinions about readings or ideas presented by the author.

The role of teachers in Saudi Arabia was shown to be more centered on directing students, with teachers more likely to have more authority than reading instructors in the US. The role of reading instructors in the US was seen as that of a facilitator of the lesson, helping students express their ideas and providing them with more active roles in class.

Reading in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 3

The third question in this category was "How many students are there in each classroom in Saudi Arabia and the US?" Responses were again very similar, with participants reporting that in Saudi Arabia, the number of students in reading classrooms ranged from 30 to 70, whereas in the US, this number was 15 to 40 at most. For example, Participant 1 said, "During my study in Saudi Arabia, I never remember a reading class with less than 30 students." He continued that "In the US, I've never been in a reading class larger than 30, or let's say 40, to be certain." Participant 2 also said, "I'm sure that reading classes in Saudi Arabia have larger numbers of

students than reading classes in the US.” Participants 3–4 identified the number of students in reading classes in Saudi Arabia as “40 to 70, or even over 70.”

Numbers reported by highly proficient readers were similar to those reported by moderately proficient readers. For example, Participant 5 said, “The number of students is higher in Saudi Arabia” and “ranges from 35 to 70.” When he gave the number of students in reading classes in the US, he reported it as “lower than Saudi Arabia” and reported the number in Saudi Arabia to be “minimum 35 to over 70.”

Participants differed in opinion regarding the number of students in the average classroom in Saudi Arabia and the US. However, there was a huge contrast between the two countries. In the US, the average number of students was reported as 15 to 40, whereas in Saudi Arabia, the number was 35 to 70 or more. Therefore, it was evident from the responses that the number of students in an average classroom is higher in Saudi Arabia.

Culture in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 1

The first question in this category was “What is the cultural perception toward schools and universities in Saudi Arabia and the US?” The educational cultures of the two countries were shown to be different. In the US, schools were perceived as places for gaining knowledge that could help students improve skills they could use in the future to have better job opportunities. Participant 1 said, “Universities in the US have more appreciation.” After I asked what he meant by “appreciation,” he clarified that he meant the real ability to change something, the opportunity to add something. Clarifying what he meant by “something,” he said it was “any kind of improvement.” Participants 2–3 likewise believed that cultural perceptions in the US of schools and universities were as a source of improvement and fostering a modern revolution. Participant 2 said, “Schools and universities generate more value in the US than in Saudi Arabia,” while

Participant 3 said, “In Saudi Arabia, the cultural perception toward universities is simple,” that is, “preparing students to get jobs.” Participant 3 believed that getting jobs also appeared in the cultural perception in the US but said it was focused on “more than getting jobs.”

Participants 5–7, shared similar responses, saying that the US was built by schools and universities, which was the cultural perception about education in that country. Participant 5, for instance, said that “Universities built NASA.” Participant 8, however, believed the cultural perceptions in the US and Saudi Arabia toward schools and universities were similar. He claimed that getting a good job was the main goal in both contexts. When asked about his reason for saying so, he responded that “Money is the language of the era.” He continued that each individual can make some money to live, but those who are educated can make more money. He came to this conclusion from being around people in both countries.

Students in Saudi Arabia were reportedly not concerned with obtaining knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Instead, they were reported to be more concerned with getting jobs and therefore prefer completing their higher education to have better employment options.

Culture in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 2

The second question in this section was “How do you describe proficient readers in Saudi Arabia and the US?” All eight participants perceived proficient readers in Saudi Arabia as those who could read while pronouncing the written symbols according to their corresponding sounds. Participant 1 described proficient readers in Saudi Arabia as “able to correctly pronounce” words, sentences, or long readings. Participant 3 thought he was a good reader until he came to the US, since he “pronounced words properly.” By “properly,” he meant “the way the teacher reads.” When asked what he thought about the pronunciation of reading instructors in Saudi Arabia, he said, “understandable” but not similar to that of native speakers. In some cases,

participants reported that proficient readers in Saudi Arabia were those who memorized a large number of vocabulary words. Participant 5 reported that proficient readers in Saudi Arabia were simply associated with “reading properly.”

In the US, proficient readers were identified as those who could dig deep into the text to understand the meaning and author’s ideas, as well as reflect on the readings. All participants responded that proficient readers in Saudi Arabia were associated with surface-level reading, i.e., word level. For example, Participant 4 said, “We were directed to memorize words,” Participant 6 said, “Usually understanding words is not sufficient” to understand the meaning, and Participant 8 said, “I can get the meaning by knowing some words” and that “I can guess.” He also said that “In the US, we learned strategies which could compensate for not memorizing as many words” and that “In the US, I need to know how to scan, skim, and reflect on the author’s ideas.” Most of the participants agreed that being a proficient reader in the US required more advanced strategies and skills and more confidence to articulate their ideas about a reading.

Culture in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 3

The third question in this category was “Is reading for pleasure a common habit in Saudi Arabia and the US?” Reading for pleasure was reported as a common habit in the US more so than in Saudi Arabia. It was reported as common in US society in schools, libraries, cafés, and other locations. Participants 1–3 gave similar descriptions, saying, “absolutely the US” as an indication that reading for pleasure was more frequent there. Participant 4 said, “even in Starbucks” to describe how common it was in the US. A few participants articulated that reading for pleasure was a common habit in the US but that most people who read for pleasure were not Americans. For example, Participant 7–8 said, “We, as international students read for pleasure in the US, but we rarely do that in Saudi Arabia.” When I asked them why this might be the case,

Participant 7 said that he was “motivated” when he found other people read for pleasure.

Participant 8 added that there were not enough places to read in Saudi Arabia. In describing his reading behavior back home, he said, “I could read things outside school, but I didn’t want to.”

When asked why he did not like to read outside school, he immediately said, “Why should I?”

Culture in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 4

The fourth question in this category was “Are there places for reading in Saudi Arabia and the US?” According to the participants, there are plenty of places to read in the US, such as public libraries, but fewer in Saudi Arabia. Participant 1 said “a lot” in reference to the number of places to read in the US, and when it came to such places in Saudi Arabia, he said there were “very few.” Participant 2 also reported that “Saudi Arabia lacks places for reading,” and Participant 8 said, “In Saudi Arabia, classrooms are assigned for reading,” clarifying that “As far as I know, there are no places assigned for reading outside classrooms.”

It was evident from participants’ remarks that there are a more limited number of places for reading in Saudi Arabia, potentially discouraging students from reading as a hobby. The cultural difference between the countries might be one of the chief reasons behind this disparity, as in the US, there are many cafés and parks where people are often found to be reading. This culture is absent in Saudi Arabia, as people there are not seen reading books in parks or cafés.

Learning in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 1

The first question in this category was “What do you usually do while reading in Saudi Arabia and the US?” Participants 1, 2, 4, and 8 all stated that “In Saudi Arabia, I just start reading out loud.” The rest shared similar responses. For example, Participant 7 reported that in Saudi Arabia he usually started reading the body of the text, whereas in the US, he read differently, first looking at the headings, introduction, and first few sentences in each paragraph

and rarely read the whole body. In Saudi Arabia, most participants claimed they focused on the word level, paying more attention to knowing the meaning of new words. Participant 8 said that in Saudi Arabia, he was usually distracted by new words and would stop reading to try to understand them. He said, “The clock would be running while I was trying to figure out the meaning of a single new word.” On the other hand, most participants reported that when reading in the US, they paid less attention to the word level and more attention to understanding the author’s ideas that could help them understand the whole text. Participant 8 said that when he read in the US, he tried to “connect” all sentences and paragraphs together and that “I am interested in getting the whole meaning more than the meaning of single words.”

Learning in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 2

The second question in this category was “Do you work individually or collaboratively? Describe your experiences in the Saudi and US contexts; which one do you prefer?” All participants agreed that in Saudi Arabia, they usually worked individually but frequently worked collaboratively in the US. For example, Participant 1 said, “I never remember working collaboratively in Saudi Arabia,” and Participant 2 mentioned that reading lessons in Saudi Arabia preferred working individually rather than collaboratively, saying, “I never worked in groups in Saudi Arabia [...] as far as I remember.” Participants 3, 4, 5, and 7 said that in the US they usually worked collaboratively, while in Saudi Arabia they worked on their own. Although most participants understood the beneficial outcomes of collaborative work, they still preferred working individually. For example, Participant 3, 6, 7, and 8 said that “Groups are good, but we don’t prefer it.” They justified this preference from not being accustomed to this type of work and from feeling “uncomfortable” with it most of the time.

Learning in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 3

The third question in this category was “What procedures or strategies do you follow to learn new words and grammatical structures in Arabic and English?” The responses revealed some variety of opinion. Some participants reported that when they planned to learn new words, they asked reading instructors for the meaning, while others looked at online dictionaries, wrote down the meanings of the new words, and tried to use them in sentences. These strategies were followed in learning new words regardless of language, appearing in the responses of Participants 1, 3, and 4. Participant 1 said, “In Saudi Arabia, I asked the teacher to translate unknown words” but that in the US, he usually “looked them up” himself. When asked to clarify his response, he said he received reading instructions in both languages (Arabic and English) in Saudi Arabia. Participant 8 gave an example, describing how one day in Saudi Arabia, during reading lessons in Arabic, he did not understand the meaning of the word *al-heem*, so he asked the reading instructor, who said it meant “thirsty camels.” He then “wrote this meaning down” and “tried to put it in a sentence.” When asked why he used this word in a sentence, he said this strategy helped him remember the meaning of the word.

Learning in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 4

The fourth question in this category was “Have you had reading difficulties in both contexts? What are they?” The eight participants responded positively. Most of the difficulties related to reading in Saudi Arabia tended to be associated with the large amount of information students had to memorize, including vocabulary, definitions, and spellings. As a result, in Saudi Arabia, they limited themselves to reading only what helped them pass their exams. Participant 1, for instance, said he never read pages beyond the ones assigned for exams. When asked to clarify what he meant by “assigned for exams,” he said that reading instructors in Saudi Arabia

told students about “the material we would get on the exam” and “Sure, they’re not giving us the exact exam, but let’s say they assign 60 pages where the exam comes only from those pages.” I asked if he could give an approximate number of pages assigned for the whole reading course. He said, “Let’s say reading instructors leave out almost half the curriculum. If it’s 120 pages long, our exam will be only from those 60 I already told you about.” I asked him what he should do with those 60 pages, e.g., read them, understand them, or memorize them, and he responded, “It’s up to you [...] If you plan on getting an A+, you have to memorize them like your name.” Participant 2 likewise reported having to memorize large chunks of information to get better grades in Saudi reading classes, and Participant 3 claimed that in Saudi Arabia, he was getting high grades in reading because he memorized more information.

All participants shared remarkably similar responses regarding reading difficulties in Saudi Arabia and the US. In the US, most reported the biggest difficulty encountered during reading to be working under pressure due to limited time. Participant 2 said, “Time makes the difference,” Participants 3–4 claimed that if they were given some extra time, they would get higher scores on the reading sections in the TOEFL. Participant 3 said, “Extra time is all I need,” while Participant 4 said that “Extra time would guarantee me better scores.” Participant 5 also reported having some reading difficulties in the US due to time constraints: “The time given to complete reading tasks is extremely insufficient.”

These responses prompted me to ask what they thought about the time given to complete reading tasks in Saudi Arabia and whether it was sufficient. They all agreed that what was important was the effort needed to complete the task, not the task itself. For example, Participant 5 said, “In Saudi Arabia, I came to the reading exam to copy information that I already had,” while in the US, Participant 8 said that “Reading tasks are new and unfamiliar to us.” Narrating

an example from his experience, Participant 7 said that during his studies in the US, he had a reading exam, and one of the questions was about describing reading strategies he usually preferred. He said, “I had memorized the strategies I preferred from the reading book we had. I thought this was what I was expected to do to get a good grade [...] but this was absolutely incorrect.” He copied what he had memorized in the answer sheet, but when he received his grades, the result was completely unexpected based on his past learning experience. He said, “The reading instructor gave me zero points but gave me a chance to redo the exam” and that “‘plagiarism’ was written on my exam sheet.”

The reported reading difficulties could be summarized into broad themes. Reading difficulties in Saudi Arabia were mainly about the amount of information students had to memorize for exams as well as being inactive in reading classrooms. In the US, difficulties reported were more about the limited time given to complete reading tasks as well as the higher cognitive effort required to answer questions. Participants usually encountered some unexpected reading difficulties during their studies in the US, which could be due to the nature of their education in Saudi Arabia.

Learning in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 5

The fifth question in this category was “How much do you read in Arabic (i.e., daily, weekly, monthly)?” Answers revealed that regardless of the amount of time participants spent reading in Saudi Arabia, they increased this time in the US. For example, Participant 1 said that in Saudi Arabia, he used to read about 10 pages a week, but in the US, he was forced to sharply increase this number to over 50 a week. When asked about what material he usually read, he responded, “absolutely school related.” I asked him why he said “absolutely,” and he clarified that “I’m tired of reading” and “this is not a fun activity.” It appeared that Participant 1 wanted to

confirm that he read the materials he was forced to read to pass exams or obtain sufficient overall grades but did not engage in reading for pleasure. Other participants gave similar responses.

Participant 3 said something worth mentioning in particular: “Most of my reading is from the Holy Qur’an.” In other words, he usually read for school, but most of his non-academic reading consisted of verses from the Qur’an. When asked about the number of pages he usually read in Saudi Arabia vs. the US per week, he said, “Let’s say 100 pages,” while in the US, he estimated reading “more than 100 pages, but the material was different.” In Saudi Arabia, most of his readings were related to the Qur’an, but in the US, he decreased the number of pages he read from the Qur’an and replaced them with schoolwork. Participants 5–6 likewise reported greatly increasing the number of pages they usually read in the US compared to Saudi Arabia.

Participant 8 said, “I usually read 70 pages [before], but it has increased to more than 100.”

All participants reported increasing the number of pages they usually read to meet the requirements of the US education system. Most were unsure of the exact number but tried to give an estimate. This question did not ask participants to talk about what they read or the quality of their readings, as it focused entirely on the quantity of pages read. However, most of them included some information about what they read as well.

Perceptions Toward Reading in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 1

The first question in this category was “What is the meaning of reading in Saudi Arabia and the US?” Most participants asked for clarification about this question, so I explained that I wanted to know what they thought about reading, what reading is, how they viewed reading, and what they considered to be proper reading. In some cases, I included examples. For Participant 8, I added, “Let’s say writing; how can you define it in Saudi Arabia as well as in the US? Is

writing based, in your opinion, only on the ability to write, or does it mean something else?” At this point, all participants said they understood the question.

Responses revealed different definitions of reading in Saudi Arabia and the US. Most participants said that reading in Saudi Arabia was more likely the ability to decode a given text. For example, Participant 2 said it was “the ability to pronounce what is written,” and Participant 5 said, “In Saudi Arabia, reading means being able to say the written symbols.” When participants were asked about the meaning of reading in the US, they said it meant more the ability to decode the text than simply understand isolated words. Participants 3, 4, and 7 added that in the US, reading meant being able to perform higher cognitive functions and operate under pressure from time constraints. Participant 7, for example, described reading in the US as requiring “higher-order skills.”

Moderately as well as highly proficient readers reported very similar responses to this question. Both groups said that reading in Saudi Arabia entailed having a surface-level (i.e., word- or sentence-level) understanding of a text, while in the US, it required higher cognitive performance under pressure.

Perceptions Toward Reading in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 2

The second question in this category was “Do you have a library in school? If so, how many times do you visit it, and what types of reading materials do you prefer to read?” Most participants reported having a library in school and frequently visiting it in the US, although they were less likely to visit libraries in Saudi Arabia. Specially, Participants 6 and 8 said they had libraries in Saudi Arabia but were “unmotivated” to visit them because they could get high grades there without spending time in the library. In contrast, all participants mentioned being encouraged to visit the library in the US, or at least forced to do so to complete some of their

assignments. Participant 1 said that he “found no escape from visiting the library in the US” but mentioned that in Saudi Arabia, visiting the library was “an optional decision.” On average, Participants 1–5 and 8 reported visiting the library in the US every week or at least every other week. However, Participants 6–7 reported visiting a library in the US almost daily. They said that going to the library did not necessarily mean they planned to read or look for books or any other kind of reference material but was rather to have some time to drink coffee and relax.

Regarding type of reading material, they preferred reading school-related material. Participant 4 said, “I read some stuff related to my area of interest,” and Participant 6 reported that reading outside his specialized area was a “nightmare.” Participant 7 said, “I read whatever book I choose” and that “my reading is different, based on the book.” I asked for clarification about “my reading is different,” and he said, “I do read some books thoroughly, but some other books, I only scan or look at the pictures, such as an atlas.”

Responses to this question indicated that not all schools in Saudi Arabia have libraries, and even if most did, they are not properly prepared for students as the references are insufficient. Students in Saudi Arabia are also less likely to be motivated to visit school libraries. On the other hand, all participants reported making regular visits to school libraries in the US at least every other week.

Perceptions Toward Reading in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 3

The third question in this category was “What kinds of texts do you remember reading in Arabic and English?” The reading tasks in both contexts shared some similarities, such as passages being followed by a set of questions related to the passage. However, all responses showed distinctions between two main categories: 1) Arabic and English reading tasks in Saudi Arabia and 2) English reading tasks in the US. Reading tasks in Saudi Arabia, regardless of

language, shared certain characteristics, such as passages being followed by questions that required only basic skills to respond to, as reported by Participant 1–3 and 6. On the other hand, reading tasks in the US reportedly demanded higher cognitive and analytical skills and for learners to perform the tasks within a limited time. Participant 8 said, for instance, that “Reading a text in the US requires much higher skills,” while Participant 6 said that “Passages followed by related questions is the most frequent type of reading texts in both Saudi Arabia and the US.”

Assessment in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 1

The first question in this category was “What kinds of reading tests did you take in Saudi Arabia and the US?” As evident from the responses, in practice, the pattern of questions following a reading differed between the two countries. In Saudi Arabia, these questions generally asked for the definition of a word, and Saudi teachers generally evaluated the ability of a student in reading in the early grades (Grades 1–6) through reading aloud with clear articulation. They would also give a passage followed by some multiple-choice items and would rarely give open-ended questions. The most common questions asked in Saudi Arabia were based on the reading material provided to the students and usually asked for the meaning of a word in the passage or would be related to the passage, as indicated by Participants 3, 4, and 7.

It is important to note that in Saudi Arabia, most participants reported practicing reading tasks and memorizing the answers before an exam, such as with Participants 4, 7, and 8. However, the default for reading tasks in the US was to read new passages and answer new questions. In addition, Participants 6 and 8 mentioned that some teachers in the US asked contextual questions or questions that required the immediate comprehension of the learners. On the other hand, participants reported that in the US, they were usually asked contextual questions, primarily synonyms or antonyms of a word. A common task that Saudi reading

instructors had students do was to structure a sentence using a particular word followed by the question that asked the meaning of that sentence. On the other hand, students in the US were more alert and prepared in reading tasks because of the higher level of reading questions they were usually given.

Assessment in Saudi Arabia and the US: Question 2

The second question in this category was “What reading tests did you struggle with in Saudi Arabia and the US?” Most participants reported that in Saudi Arabia, they struggled with Qiyas, and in the US, they struggled with the TOEFL. They usually encountered some difficulties with the verbal section of Qiyas, and TOEFL readings were unfamiliar with insufficient time given to complete them. Participants 3 and 6 said that Qiyas texts were above their reading level. Participants 1, 2, and 8 likewise said that Qiyas did not match the reading level of the test takers. On the other hand, participants reported that they could not get higher TOEFL scores because of the limited time given to complete the section. They also said that the reading section in the TOEFL usually contained some unfamiliar topics, such as dinosaurs or geographic or chemical terms. They found themselves pausing at many unknown terms, which caused them to be unable to correctly respond to questions.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter discusses the themes identified across participant responses regarding aspects of learning in Saudi Arabia and the US. These included 1) the role of educational background on L2 reading and 2) L1 and L2 reading differences among highly and moderately proficient readers, followed by a summary of highly and moderately proficient readers and the conclusion. Based on the themes, key trends for each theme have been identified and analyzed based on the results of the interviews. The primary trends are considered for each theme.

Role of Educational Background on L2 Reading

This study has revealed some unique findings different from previous studies that reported the reading difficulties experienced by Saudi ESL students to be caused by reasons other than prior education. Instead, this study found that most Saudi ESL learners' difficulties in L2 reading could be associated with their reading background in Saudi Arabia. Koda (2005)

found that L2 reading required greater effort on the part of learners than what they were accustomed to in Saudi Arabia. This issue was not limited to linguistic knowledge but also included their mental processes when moving from one context to another, where some things did not meet their expectations. This movement from L1 to L2 reading included two stages: 1) moving from Arabic reading to English reading in Saudi Arabia (an EFL context) and 2) moving from EFL reading to ESL reading in the US. As proposed by an increasing number of studies (e.g., Derakhsan & Karimi, 2015; Koda, 2005), this could lead learners to encounter difficulties in their L2 reading in the US caused by a lack of reading background combined with the advanced reading requirements in the ESL context.

This study supported the findings of other studies (e.g., Mustafa, 2002; Nezami, 2012) that Saudi learners of English lacked sufficient motivation and basic communicative abilities to learn English in an EFL context, which could impact their reading abilities in the US in an ESL context. Teaching in Saudi Arabia according to Mustafa (2002) is primarily test-driven, so readers primarily studied to simply pass the test. However, this test-driven teaching style was not limited to teaching learners to efficiently pass reading exams, as it directed the researcher's attention to the quality of the reading exam itself, which tends to display questions that do not require higher-order thinking. Tracing those questions to Saudi reading curriculum shows it to be outdated as well (Al-Hazmi, 2003; Bersamina, 2009; Mustafa, 2002; Nezami, 2012).

To succeed in the new reading context, Saudi ESL learners should try to be flexible and understand that reading in the US has different requirements. As claimed by some studies in the field, L2 reading comprises a variety of factors not found in the L1 (e.g., Durgunoglu & Hancin-Bhatt, 1992; Jiang, 2011; Kaushanskaya et al., 2011). Despite these factors and the increased difficulty of L2 reading for Saudi ESL learners, the highly proficient participants in the present study showed a greater and more immediate willingness to accept these changes, altering their reading behavior to meet the requirements of the new reading context in the US. However, the responses of the moderately proficient readers showed that they spent more time coping with the new reading context, applying their prior limited reading strategies during their initial exposure to US reading classes.

The interviews have allowed for an in-depth understanding of the effect of educational background on L2 reading. In all eight participants' responses to the first question (where they described a reading lesson in Saudi Arabia), they mentioned being told to read silently for about five min. However, when they came to the US, they were confronted with reading procedures

very different from those they were used to. This silent reading time assigned by reading instructors in Saudi Arabia could cause Saudi ESL learners some difficulty in reading without such preparation. Highly and moderately proficient readers reached similar conclusions about this time spent reading silently. However, the highly proficient readers were still able to adapt to reading classes in the US better than moderately proficient readers. This gap between highly and moderately proficient readers could be associated with their reading level in the L1, since the highly proficient readers were able to compensate for the lack of preparation time by using their stronger reading strategies.

This finding supported Derakhsan and Karimi's (2015) claim that the L1 could influence L2 reading. It also supported Cummins' (1979) linguistic interdependence hypothesis by showing that underlying reading skills could be positively transferred from the L1 to the L2. Moderately proficient readers spent more time trying to gain confidence when exposed to reading classes in the US because they lacked the preparation time given in Saudi Arabia. Highly proficient readers compensated for this loss of preparation time in the US differently from what moderately proficient readers usually did. As reported by Participants 2 and 4, highly proficient readers used strategies to read more quickly, such as scanning and skimming. In contrast, moderately proficient readers, such as Participants 5, 7, and 8, mainly looked at the first paragraph word by word. They reported missing the reading instructors translating unknown words for them and the extra time at the beginning of class. However, both proficiency groups were aware they were moving from being dependent on reading instructors to being independent readers in the US.

L2 readers in the present study indicated no tendency to read non-academic texts (cf. Abhakorn, 2008). They limited their reading to class-related material, which caused them to

direct all their attention to similar types of readings. In addition, when the eight participants were in Saudi Arabia, they were mostly unmotivated and unable to find places to read. The lack of reading for pleasure in the L1 was thus likely transferred into the new ESL reading context. Consequently, they associated reading only with schoolwork, and although they used to read articles in Arabic, they reported reading only a few pages when reading outside the curriculum.

Participants' dislike of reading non-assigned texts in the US could have also been carried over from their prior reading experience in the L1. As reported by Participant 8 regarding his reading behavior in Saudi Arabia, "I could read things outside school, but I didn't want to." It was clear that reading for pleasure was discouraged in the L1/EFL context. Especially striking was when Participant 8 was asked why he did not like reading outside the material assigned for class, asking, "Why should I?" From this response, he clearly saw no importance in reading for pleasure in his prior educational experience. Participants 6–8 said they were unable to provide better performance in reading during their initial L2 exposure in the US. The underlying reasons for this delay likely stemmed from their previous L1 reading experience. They did not initially understand that the expectations were very different in the two contexts and were busy questioning what reading was in the US and what expectations they should meet.

Responses from Participants 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, and 8 showed that even though they had graduated with a BA in English in Saudi Arabia, they were unable to understand how to get higher scores in the reading sections on the TOEFL, especially at the beginning. Participant 7, for instance, reported not understanding most of the sentences in the TOEFL, and while he knew most of the words in the text, he could not answer the questions. It is likely that the higher-order thinking required by the questions was the source of his difficulty, and Participants 2, 4, and 8 said they were unfamiliar with that type of question. Participant 4 said, "I'm not embarrassed to

tell you that it was my first time have a reading question that asked me to rearrange about eight sentences following the order they were presented in the text.” Participant 4 was describing one of the regular reading questions test takers usually receive on the TOEFL, where participants would need to apply fast reading strategies to respond accurately under limited time, despite this kind of activity being very different from the way they were trained in Saudi Arabia.

A key takeaway here is that reading instructors in language institutions and some academic programs in the US perceive their job to be limited to teaching reading materials, following the syllabi, and providing assessment. This could increase the anxiety of Saudi ESL learners as they try to get higher reading levels while following prior reading expectations that often conflict with those in the US. Participants 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 used to receive training and some question banks before a reading exam to give them an idea of what it would look like. This training is not limited to certain academic levels in Saudi Arabia but is used from early schooling to the university level. Furthermore, Saudi ESL learners in Saudi Arabia usually have reading exams similar to exercises they were already exposed to during the semester. Therefore, this dramatic change in reading exams could cause them to have a lower reading level in the US.

Participant 8, a highly proficient reader, reported that his level in English, specifically in reading, was better than the non-native English instructor who used to teach in the language institution where he was studying. He claimed that this instructor was not able to answer most of his questions and that the instructor primarily cared about how long he stayed in the language institution. He said that most of the language institutions in the US mainly cared about funding, not the quality of learning outcomes. He said it is more beneficial for the language institution to have learners stay longer to increase the tuition they or their governments pay. This suggested

that some reading instructors might not be qualified to teach or unwilling to improve the reading level of L2 learners so they can pass the TOEFL.

Even the quality of reading questions presented in language proficiency exams, such as the TOEFL, differed from what participants were used to in their prior education. They thus spent time repositioning themselves in a new reading context that was dissimilar from what they knew. However, the interviews revealed that participants with higher reading levels were able to increase their reading scores in the US because they needed less time to modify their expectations about reading compared to moderately proficient readers.

Therefore, educational background was shown to influence the reading habits of L2 learners. The techniques applied in learning a lesson were also different. However, in this regard, participants preferred the learning style prevalent in the US rather than that of the Saudi education system. The highly proficient group reflected on having English reading skills and learning strategies that were more effective than those of the moderately proficient readers, as apparent in the response of Participant 4: “In the US, I need to know how to scan, skim, and reflect on the author’s ideas.” It appeared that highly proficient readers were alert to different expectations for reading and demonstrated greater flexibility to adapt to the new reading context, despite experiencing a similar reading context to that of the moderately proficient readers.

L1 and L2 Reading Differences Among Highly and Moderately Proficient Readers

According to participant responses in this study, oral passage reading fluency, which entails reading a text aloud for a few min, could be related to the effective reading comprehension abilities of L2 learners. This finding was similar to other studies (e.g., Al-Nasser, 2015; Al-Qahtani, 2016). The study also found that L2 students could face increased reading difficulties with L2 reading in the US due to having less reading experience and practice with L2

reading (cf. Al-Nasser, 2015). In addition, the L2 learners had limited linguistic knowledge when introduced to the ESL reading environment, as their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and structure was limited (cf. Al-Qahtani, 2016). However, this knowledge varied among the highly and moderately proficient readers. One of the common factors in both groups was that they all experienced L2 reading practices that differed from their home country (cf. Brevik et al., 2016). The major reason behind this came from their reading two different languages and their cognitive system involving two different language systems.

Highly as well as moderately proficient readers had different educational backgrounds, as the Saudi education system reflects different practices; for instance, a few of the schools had well-prepared libraries but most did not. This variation greatly influenced the reading attributes of participants as different social and cultural assumptions were present among them. An example is the inability of L2 learners to communicate seamlessly with native English speakers (cf. Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). The moderately proficient readers were subjected to more complicated communication issues with native English speakers than highly proficient readers.

Cultural background was also a major factor. Participants and their reading practices indicated that the cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and the US had an impact on their desire to read in English. The abundance of coffee shops, parks, libraries, and other locations where people can be seen reading for pleasure can lead to more non-academic reading practices (Han, 2015). The highly proficient participants reflected on these cultural differences and their impact on their will to read. On the other hand, the moderately proficient readers were unable to identify why they had not developed the tendency to read books outside the material provided for class. L2 reading is influenced by one's cultural backdrop, as in the US, learners are subjected to a different culture than that of Saudi Arabia (Grabe, 2014). In Saudi Arabia, because of the

absence of a culture of reading in libraries and having fewer resources, L2 learning is not as effective as in the US. According to the participants, US culture was more effective at increasing L2 reading and helping learners achieve the desired proficiency in comprehensive reading.

The interviews revealed varying levels of English proficiency among Saudi L2 learners. The results indicated proficiency level was an indicator of the difficulty readers encountered in understanding complex and difficult vocabulary. Another important factor was that highly proficient readers faced fewer challenges reading English passages than other participants. Based on their L1 reading ability, participants were divided into two groups: highly proficient and moderately proficient readers. Their proficiency level was thus used as an indicator of their L2 reading skills.

Summary of Highly and Moderately Proficient Readers

The highly proficient readers faced fewer challenges in L2 learning as the techniques they used to learn new words, grammar, and syntax were more effective. These participants demonstrated the ability to understand linguistic differences between their L1 and L2. To learn new L2 rules for sentence structure and construction, it is important to apply different techniques than those used for sentence structure in Arabic. These participants showed greater mastery over their L1 and acquired new techniques that facilitated their L2 learning process. These participants were thus more comfortable in the US learning environment as it provided them with better ways of developing their comprehensive learning skills (cf. Mehrabi, 2014). The teaching and learning methods used in L2 learning in the US further helped in this process.

Moderately proficient readers had lower reading skills than highly proficient readers. The results indicated that moderately proficient readers could not effectively communicate with native English speakers (cf. Sabatin, 2013). Another important finding was that moderately

proficient readers lacked extensive reading habits as much as highly proficient readers did. However, unlike the highly proficient readers, moderately proficient readers could not effectively perform in group activities with native English speakers. Therefore, as previous studies have suggested (e.g., Al-Qahtani, 2016), the reading attitudes of the highly proficient readers demonstrated more comprehensive reading skills than the moderately proficient readers reflected. At the same time, these participants still appreciated the learning activities of the US classroom. Participant reading habits greatly helped in identifying the characteristics of moderately proficient readers (cf. Khan, 2016), with most moderately proficient readers lacking the habit of reading books in English.

Although they used to read books in their L1, they did not read books in English apart from the reading material provided for class. Most participants were comfortable reading books in Arabic for pleasure rather than in English. This reflects a tendency to avoid English-language books beyond schoolwork, and moderately proficient readers felt forced to read the texts in class (cf. Sabatin, 2013). They saw English sessions as imposing rather than enjoying the process of learning. This could be one of the reasons behind their inability to develop proficient L2 reading skills. Since they did not read non-academic texts regularly, their vocabulary in English was not as enriched as their knowledge of Arabic words.

In addition, participants preferred individual rather than group learning. Most L2 learning in the US emphasizes groupwork to increase classroom interaction. However, the moderately proficient readers were uncomfortable conversing with native English speakers as they lacked the necessary vocabulary to effectively participate in the conversation. A related factor is that Arabic speakers tend to consider the individual learning approach to be more effective (Mehrabi, 2014). This opens the door for further research into why learners can be more or less effective in

individual rather than collaborative learning. In collaborative learning, learners with different learning skills and capabilities come together to learn more effectively. However, for non-native English speakers, it is often difficult to keep up with the faster learning style of native English speakers. Out of shyness or to avoid embarrassment, they fail to make meaningful connections with other learners. Therefore, they prefer individual to collaborative learning. Since individual learning is an established practice in the Saudi education system, their preference for individual learning could be considered an effect of their educational background.

A comparison of these two groups has revealed several differences in their learning attributes. Reading proficiency refers to variables that include the automaticity of word recognition and familiarity with sentence structure and topic awareness. Thus, it has been found that ESL learners can often be grouped into one of two types of readers: highly proficient readers and moderately proficient readers (Grabe, 2014). On the other hand, there is considerable research on reader behavior that directly and indirectly facilitates reading. The highly proficient readers in the present study tended to grasp the facets of L2 reading more quickly, while moderately proficient readers often faced difficulties in understanding vocabulary, slowing down their reading. Furthermore, moderately proficient readers managed to understand the rules of the L2 but faced problems implementing them. The ability to proficiently read the L2 is thus a fundamental skill that could affect individuals' learning experience and progress.

Pedagogical Recommendations

This study proposes pedagogical recommendations for Saudi reading teachers. Most participants reported being teacher-dependent, as they would ask the teacher to translate unknown words. Reading teachers in Saudi Arabia should increase the confidence of Saudi readers by encouraging them to be independent rather than teacher-dependent. Reading teachers

should also train students to read under time pressure and effectively use reading strategies and skills. Doing so would improve the reading performance of Saudi readers when exposed to reading in the US or when completing the reading sections in standardized tests, such as the TOEFL and IELTS. Furthermore, teachers should give Saudi readers the opportunity to be active by having them work collaboratively with their peers, which will decrease shyness and improve their confidence in expressing their views. As revealed by participants, the reading passages given to students during the regular reading sessions were also given to them in the reading exams, which caused them to measure their reading ability based on their ability to memorize and recall rather than their understanding of the text. Therefore, passages from homework or class activities should not be reused on reading exams, which will result in higher reading performance when students encounter new reading passages.

Limitations of the Study

This study had the following limitations. First, it was limited to Saudi university students learning English as an L2 in Saudi Arabia and the US. Therefore, all participants were non-native English speakers whose L1 was Arabic. Second, only one test, the TOEFL, was used to measure learners' L2 reading ability (cf. Levine & Haus, 2005). All eight participants reported their TOEFL scores for reading, where the highest score was 30. In addition, the Qiyas tests were used to measure L1 reading ability. This battery of tests is administered by the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education. These two standardized tests helped the researcher determine participants' reading proficiency in their L1 and L2. A third limitation was gender, as all eight participants were male due to limited access to female students because of Saudi culture. The fourth limitation was the study's focus on reading while discarding any other linguistic knowledge.

Conclusion

This study has sought to determine the influence of educational background on Saudi ESL students' ability to read in English. It has analyzed data from the interviews of eight Saudi ESL learners using a qualitative methodology to delve deeper into the issue. To make meaningful comparisons, participants were divided into two groups of four each: four highly proficient readers and four moderately proficient readers. The highly proficient readers were shown to have acquired necessary techniques and strategies to learn new English words and grammar rules more effectively and efficiently. These readers also more often read non-academic texts beyond their school reading assignments, which helped them increase their understanding of the contextual meanings of different words, a finding similar to that of Turuk (2008). This practice thus helped them understand how to use words contextually in sentences.

The results suggested that the US education system was more effective than the Saudi education system in terms of improving reading skills. The assessment of learning skills was also different between these countries. The assessment used in the US was found to be more effective in gauging the analytical skills of L2 readers. One of the main factors influencing reading proficiency was the habit of regular reading after learners were exposed to the US education system. In addition, it was important for learners to have the necessary resources and training to increase their L2 reading proficiency. The traditional teaching and assessment style of Saudi teachers failed to improve student reading proficiency. As a result, reading proficiency varied due to individual reading practices and the application of techniques to learn new words and grammar rules (cf. Shah, 2008). The present study has shed light on readers' perceptions regarding their education system, culture, and reading habits (cf. Sinha, Banerjee, Sinha, &

Shastri, 2009). In doing so, it has also produced detailed information about the factors affecting native Arabic speakers studying English.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Reading in Saudi Arabia and the US

1. Describe a reading lesson in Saudi Arabia and the US.
2. What is the role of the teacher in Saudi Arabia and the US?
3. How many students are there in each classroom in Saudi Arabia and the US?

Culture in Saudi Arabia and the US

1. What is the cultural perception toward schools and universities in Saudi Arabia and the US?
2. How do you describe proficient readers in Saudi Arabia and the US?
3. Is reading for pleasure a common habit in Saudi Arabia and the US?
4. Are there places for reading in Saudi Arabia and the US?

Learning Process in Saudi Arabia and the US

1. What do you usually do while reading in Saudi Arabia and the US?
2. Do you work individually or collaboratively? Describe your experiences in the Saudi and US contexts; which one do you prefer?
3. What procedures or strategies do you follow to learn new words and grammatical structures in Arabic and English?
4. Have you had reading difficulties in both contexts? What are they?
5. How much do you read in Arabic (i.e., daily, weekly, monthly)?

Perceptions Toward Reading in Saudi Arabia and the US

1. What is the meaning of reading in Saudi Arabia and the US?

2. Do you have a library in school? If so, how many times do you visit it, and what types of reading materials do you prefer to read?

3. What kinds of texts do you remember reading in Arabic and English?

Assessment in Saudi Arabia and the US

1. What kinds of reading tests did you take in Saudi Arabia and the US?

2. What reading tests did you struggle with in Saudi Arabia and the US?

Appendix B

Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The Effect of Educational Background on Second Language Reading

You are being invited to take part in a research study about investigating the effect of educational background on second language reading. You are being invited to take part in this research study because you studied reading in two contexts, EFL and ESL, which means you studied reading in Saudi Arabia and in the US. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about eight people to do so. All of the participants should be Saudis.

The person in charge of this study is Hammad Ali Alshammari, PhD candidate at the University of Memphis, Department of English. He is being guided in this research by Professor Emily Thrush. There will not be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

The purpose of this study is to understand difficulties that caused Saudi students at US universities to get lower scores in reading sections. This research hypothesizes that the main gap is transferred from their prior education. They (Saudi students) most likely define reading as a process of recalling words, phrases, sentences, ideas, or thoughts. This means they never associate reading with higher mental operations as is required in standardized tests, such as the TOEFL. This research tries to understand whether they lack the ability to improve their reading scores in English or merely could not understand what reading entails.

All participants in this study must have completed their past education in the Saudi school system until graduating from college with a bachelor's degree in English or limited to one of the following areas: literature, linguistics, rhetoric, composition, or translation. Volunteers

must have started their MA or PhD program at a US university in one of the above areas. Any participant who does not meet the above requirements will be excluded from being part of this study. All participants must have taken the Qiyas mandatory Arabic proficiency test (verbal section) as well as the TOEFL English proficiency test (reading section). By doing this study, we hope to learn the possible causes of reading difficulties of Saudi learners of English.

The research procedures will be conducted at the participants' locations closest to the researcher; for example, if 11 participants agree to participate in this study, the closest participants to the researcher will be chosen and sent their appointment approval. The researcher will travel to the participant to conduct the interview face to face to ensure the validity of the responses and control for any unexpected factors.

You will need to come to the Student center at the university you are studying at now; please make sure to include the right campus. For example, if you are studying in the Linguistics Department at Southern Illinois University, please include: the Carbondale campus, Student Center (Starbucks café), February 15, 2018 at 10 am. However, you are free to modify this later if you need to do so. The interview consists of 17 questions, which you will need to answer thoroughly, and it will last for one hour and be based on your experience in the two contexts you have studied reading in, Saudi Arabia and the United States. You can ask for clarification at any point during the interview.

To the best of our knowledge, your participation in this study has no risk of harm. You will not get any personal benefit from taking part in this study.

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before

volunteering. As a student, if you decide not to take part in this study, your choice will have no effect on your academic status.

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study. There are no costs associated with taking part in the study. You will not receive any rewards or payment for taking part in the study. We will make every effort to keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

This study is anonymous. That means that no one will know that the information you give came from you. The researcher will use coding numbers instead of your names to protect your privacy and confidentiality. The participants' names will not appear at any time in the interview. All data will be kept locked under the strict supervision of the researcher in private and personal locker(s).

If you decide to take part in the study, you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. The researcher conducting the study may need to withdraw you from the study. This may occur if you are not able to follow the directions he gives you or if he finds that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you.

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns,

or complaints about the study, you can contact the researcher, Hammad Ali Alshammari at hlshmmri@memphis.edu or Tel: 901-310-0790, or contact the research supervisor Professor Emily Thrush Tel: 901-678-4215, ethrush@memphis.edu, Fax: 901-678-2226. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705. We will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of [authorized] person obtaining informed consent

Date

Appendix C

IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board
Office of Sponsored Programs
University of Memphis
315 Admin Bldg
Memphis, TN 38152-3370

Feb 9, 2018

PI Name: Hammad Alshammari
Co-Investigators:
Advisor and/or Co-PI: Emily Thrush
Submission Type: Initial
Title: The Effect of Educational Background on Second Language Reading
IRB ID : #PRO-FY2018-391

Expedited Approval: Feb 9, 2018
Expiration: Feb 9, 2019

Approval of this project is given with the following obligations:

1. This IRB approval has an expiration date, an approved renewal must be in effect to continue the project prior to that date. If approval is not obtained, the human consent form(s) and recruiting material(s) are no longer valid and any research activities involving human subjects must stop.
2. When the project is finished or terminated, a completion form must be submitted.
3. No change may be made in the approved protocol without prior board approval.

Thank you,
James P. Whelan, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair
The University of Memphis.