

Developing Reading and Literacy in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study examines the Saudi national reading curriculum for Grades 1-6; defines the word identification, reading comprehension and teaching approaches; describes the reading lesson design, reading themes, the word identification and reading comprehension skills developed; and reports the strengths and weaknesses of the reading curriculum.

Keywords: *elementary reading, Saudi Arabia, basal readers, textbooks, national curriculum.*

1. Introduction

Children start to learn to read in the first grade and continue to do so throughout school. Teachers use different approaches to early reading development such as the alphabetic, linguistic, phonics, analytic, synthetic, language experience, whole language and balanced approaches. Many use a basal reader to develop the students' ability to read. For example, Garofalo (1991) found that the basal reader was the primary instructional tool of all kindergarten and first-grade teachers in six New Jersey school districts and 60% of the teachers used the Language Experience Approach. Teachers with zero to five years of experience placed more emphasis on the basal reader.

A review of the literature has shown that basal reader series have been examined by several researchers to find out what they emphasize and how effective they are. For instance, Aukerman(1981) reviewed 15 elementary basal reader series. Findings showed that all the series contain a reading readiness program; and they provide the children with visual and auditory discrimination, alphabet, sound-symbol association, and shaping of letters. They use picture books in the early stages of reading development, with 2-sentence captions, expanding to 3 and then 4-sentence captions. They have a supplementary word identification booklet that matches the stories that the children read in the basal reader and follow a phonic analysis approach.

In another study, Durkin (1990A) examined the phonics instruction that five basal reader series provide from kindergarten through grade six. A wide gap existed between the

phonics taught and the recommendations made for dealing with new vocabulary. All five series paid considerable attention to consonant sounds in their kindergarten manuals and to numerous ways of spelling long vowel sounds. Two series dealt with blending as a means for identifying words; another used blending to emphasize whatever sound was receiving attention. She found that blending was done mostly by the teacher, not the children. Four series taught a few generalizations for dividing words into syllables. All five programs failed to deal with phonics in a way that made its value for reading apparent to children. In another study, Durkin (1990B) found that basal reader programs used for kindergarten reading instruction did not allow teachers to offer flexible individual instruction to children and that first grade pre-primers had an erratic prerequisite reliance on the phonics taught in basal texts.

In a third study, Flowers & Roos (1994) reviewed the literature on and identified key elements of successful literature-based programs. They concluded that literature-based reading programs serve as a viable approach to teaching reading at the elementary level. They recommended that teachers should provide an environment in which students view themselves as good readers who can enjoy and profit from various kinds of materials.

Furthermore, Meyer et al. (1992) examined three first- and second-grade meaning-emphasis series and one word-recognition-emphasis series widely used in the public schools. Results indicated that two of the meaning-emphasis series were quite similar; the third one presented the greatest balance between word-recognition and meaning-emphasis activities at the second-grade level. Comprehensibility of story selections was substantially different among the series. All series were found to have an instructional flow from first to second grade.

Finally, Tulley (1991) examined the effectiveness of the basal reader selection process in a Midwestern school district. He concluded that an effective basal reader selection process is one which results in teachers identifying materials that help bring about the type of reading instruction they seek for their classrooms.

Like many parts of the world, Saudi Arabian public schools use standardized basal readers to teach reading to students in grades 1-6. In grades 1-3, the students learn to read and in grades 4-6, they read for comprehension. With this national curriculum, teachers use the same basal readers with students, cover the same texts and exercises, and follow the same teaching approaches. The aims of the present study are to describe how the elementary national reading curriculum in Saudi Arabia develops reading and literacy skills among elementary school learners. For each grade level, the study describes the

reading lesson design, passage length, types of exercises, the word identification skills, the reading comprehension levels (i.e., literal, inferential, appreciation and critical), and the strengths and weaknesses of basal readers. Descriptions are based on a content analysis of elementary basal readers, reading objectives, teaching guidelines and reading texts and exercises. No test results, student or teacher surveys were used.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the following sections, the study defines reading, word identification, reading comprehension, approaches to teaching reading, the Arabic writing system and the national reading curriculum in Saudi Arabia.

2.1 What is Reading

Schools of thought differ in their definition of reading. Definitions range from the "visual perception of the shapes and meanings of words" (Harris, 1969), to comprehending the written message in away comparable to comprehending an oral message (Carroll, 1964), to a series of thinking, evaluation, making judgments, interpreting, and problem solving. Other definitions view reading as a process in which the meaning clarification and thinking processes are connected with written symbols. The latter definition involves word identification and reading comprehension, each of which is defined below.

2.2 Word Identification

According to Ives, Bursuk and Ives (1983), word identification skills are those that help the reader pronounce written symbols such as letters, words, and sentences or derive meaning from them. They classified word identification skills into the following:

- i. **Using visual configuration clues** such as word length, word shape, double letters, capital letters, position of letters in words, and characteristics of individual letters in words.
- ii. **Using picture clues** such as using single- and multiple-object pictures, details of the pictured object, actions portrayed by the pictured object, clues from maps, diagrams, and graphs to infer the meaning that specific word forms represent.
- iii. **Using semantic clues** to identify whole words in a semantic verbal context such as the topic, words preceding and/or following an unfamiliar word in the same sentence,

words in sentences preceding and/or following the sentence in which an unfamiliar word appears, commonly used expressions, synonyms, antonyms, definitions, explanations and examples.

- iv. **Using syntactic clues** such as different sentence patterns, word order sequences, agreement, structure word markers, derivational suffixes, inflectional endings, punctuation and typographical devices like italicization and bold face.
- v. **Using word structure clues** such as roots, prefixes, suffixes, verb, noun, and adjective inflections, plurality and morphemic combinations.
- vi. **Using phonic clues (phonic analysis)** to separate words into their spelling units, and relate spelling units to their pronunciation equivalences. These are called phoneme-grapheme, spelling-sound, letter-sound, or spelling pronunciation correspondences.
- vii. **Syllabication:** Segmenting words into syllable, estimating the number of syllables in word forms, blending syllables to form words, and recognizing mono and multiphonemic words and divisions between and within words.

2.3 Reading Comprehension:

There are two theories that describe reading comprehension: the first one views reading comprehension as a whole skill that cannot be broken down into smaller sub-skills and depends on the information and knowledge in the reader's head that he/she uses while reading, i.e. it is the continuous interaction between the reader and material read. This theory emphasizes the use of teaching strategies that encourage extensive reading by the students. The second theory views reading as an aggregate of sub-skills such as identifying the main idea or supporting details of a text (Richek, List and Lerner, 1983).

To facilitate the teaching of reading comprehension to children, Barrett (1974) proposed the following reading comprehension levels:

- i. **Literal comprehension:** It refers to the literal recognition, recall or verification of details, main ideas, sequence of events, comparisons, cause-effect relationships, and character traits.
- ii. **Inferential Comprehension** such as inferring supporting details, sequence, comparisons, cause and effect relationships, character traits, figurative language and predicting outcomes.

- iii. **Evaluation:** It refers to judgments of reality or fantasy, fact or opinion, adequacy or validity, appropriateness, worth, desirability and acceptability. It also refers to judging the language and effect of the text in the light of appropriate criteria.
- iv. **Appreciation:** It refers emotional responses to the content, and sensitivity to various types of literary genres; emotional response to the plot or theme, identification with characters and incidents, reactions to the author's use of language, and response to generated images.

2.4 Reading Approaches:

Some of the teaching approaches used to develop reading are given below.

Definitions were mainly taken from Harris and Hodges (1981).

- i. **Alphabetic approach:** a synthetic method of teaching reading and spelling in use from ancient times until the early part of the 19th century. In this method, students first identified letters by their names; next spelled out syllable; then words containing from one to eight syllables.
- ii. **Linguistic approach:** It is based upon regular sound-symbol patterns.
- iii. **Phonics:** It stresses symbol-sound relationships especially in beginning reading instruction. In *synthetic phonics*, the student learns the sounds represented by letters and letter combinations, blends these sounds together to pronounce words and is taught the phonic generalizations that apply in learning symbol-sound correspondences. In *analytical phonics*, the student learns a number of key sight words, is taught the relevant phonic generalizations to particular examples in learning symbol-sound correspondences. In *whole-word phonics*, the sounds represented by certain letters and groups of letters within whole words are compared and contrasted to those in other whole words, avoiding the separate sounding of word parts.
- iv. **Word method:** A substantial number of words is learned as whole units for reading before word analysis is started.
- v. **Analytic approach:** It starts with whole units of language as words, phrases or sentences, and later breaks these down into their parts.
- vi. **Synthetic approach:** It starts with word parts or elements as letters, sounds, or syllables, and later combines them into words.

- vii. **Language experience approach:** Here, the student's own words or oral composition are written down and used as materials of instruction for reading, writing and spelling, speaking and listening.
- viii. **Whole language approach:** It is a "top-down" theory of reading which emphasizes the importance of teaching language as a whole entity as contrasted with a skills-oriented approach associated with the "bottom-up" model of reading (Hsu, 1994). It includes the teaching and learning of skills and/or strategies within a setting in order to accomplish a goal that cements, extends, and expands learning. It is frequently coupled with an integrated or thematic approach to learning.
- ix. **Balanced approach:** draws on both phonics and whole-language methods. Here, teachers also supplement basal readers with community and local reading materials (Reyhner, 2001).

2.5 The Arabic Writing System:

Arabic is a right-to-left alphabetic language. It has 25 consonant and 3 long vowel letters, in addition to 12 diacritical marks including three short vowels. Each consonant letter has a detached form and one to four attached forms. Letters are attached together to make words and diacritics are placed on top or underneath a letter. In the early stages, children learn to decode words with diacritical marks. When they master the word identification skills, they decode words without the diacritical marks. Words in books, newspapers and magazines are normally printed without diacritical marks.

Arabic is also diglossic, i.e. it has a colloquial spoken form and a standard form. Phonological, lexical and syntactic differences exist between the spoken and written forms. From birth to school age, children are exposed to the colloquial form at home and to the Standard form on T.V. (cartoon films) and children's books.

2.6 The National Reading Curriculum in Saudi Arabia:

The language arts program in Saudi elementary schools consists of reading, spelling, composing, poetry, spelling and penmanship. All grade levels use 2 basal readers per year (Fall and Spring basals). In addition, Grades 4-6 use separate textbooks for grammar, poetry, spelling and penmanship. The reading instructional time, the total number of pages and units of each basal reader are shown in Table (1). Time allocated to reading instruction decreases as

the students grow older. Reading objectives are not directly and clearly stated in the teaching guidelines and word identification and comprehension skills are not listed either.

Table (1)

Teaching hours, Number of Pages and Units in Basals, Text Length, Total of New Vocabulary Items

Grades	Semesters	Teaching Hours Per Week	Total Pages in Basals	# of Units	Text Length in Words		Total of New words in Rdg. Text
					Mdn	Range	
Gr1	Fall	12	108	30	-	-	-
	Spring	11	142	32	34	20-40	-
Gr2	Fall	9	226	20	78	30-121	54
	Spring	9	200	20	116	75-204	60
Gr3	Fall	5	88	17	96	50 - 143	91
	Spring	5	78	17	110	24-143	99
Gr4	Fall	4	88	21	134	90-212	121
	Spring	4	102	22	135	97-632	123
Gr5	Fall	3	71	19	171	85-301	134
	Spring	3	72	18	194	107-250	123
Gr6	Fall	3	71	18	183	82-314	120
	Spring	3	76	18	229	70-497	113

3. Data Collection and Analysis:

All basal readers for grades 1-6 (2005/2006 edition) were inspected page by page. All reading units, reading texts, questions and exercises were analyzed and categorized. The reading themes were categorized into narrative and expository. The questions were categorized according to the language skills (word identification, reading comprehension, oral reading, listening, speaking, composing, and spelling) and language elements (vocabulary, grammar, penmanship). Reading comprehension questions were categorized into literal, inferential, evaluation, appreciation levels. The instructional approach was identified based on the definitions given above. Results are reported in frequencies, percentage, descriptive statistics (mean, median and range) as well as qualitative descriptions.

4. Results

At each grade level, the basal reader is an integrated course in which the students practice all the language skills and all the language elements in context based on the lesson theme. A balanced approach that combines whole language, phonics and analytical approaches is used. Teaching guidelines are provided in the introduction and in the bottom margin of each book.

Developing Reading in Grade 1:

Reading instruction starts with a readiness phase in which the students are presented with pictures of familiar objects, followed by lines and shapes that aim at aiding the learner to hold the pencil, and trace and color those shapes and letters. Then, the Arabic alphabet is divided into 7 groups of letters according to the letter shape in word initial, medial and final positions. The learners start reading one-form letters, two-form letters, and four-form letter groups. Letters of each group are presented one at a time. Each letter is presented on two pages: a presentation page and a reinforcement page. Single whole words are presented to the students with a picture to help them recognize the word and understand its meaning. In each word, the letter under study is highlighted in blue. In the third row, words containing the letter with /a/, /u/ and /i/ diacritical marks are presented separately in large boxes (in blue), then in bold type in a fourth large box with arrows showing the direction in which the letter is written, then it is faintly presented in a fifth box with arrows to help the learners trace it. In the fourth row, the same letter is repeated 4 times in sets of 3 small boxes. In each set the letter is marked with each short vowel. In the case of letters with several forms, the attached form is displayed in the first three large boxes and the detached form is displayed for tracing. All the shapes are presented in the small boxes with each set focusing on one form and marked with each all short vowels.

On the reinforcement page, the same words are presented without a picture in the first row. Then the students match the target word with identical word in the response words. Thirdly, they read and write the letter with each short vowel in isolation. Fourthly, they write the missing target letter in the words. In the case of letters with several forms, the children read 6 words with a highlighted target letter, and then read the same words again in a random order with no highlighting. Then they read and write each attached form with the three short vowels and finally, they fill in the missing letter in the words under study.

The words that the children learn to decode are selected from the children's dictionary and from words used around the learners. Certain words are repeated throughout the exercises especially in the early stages. Repetitions decrease as the learners progress. The learners do not trace letters that they did not learn to read nor words in which some letters were not studied. They decode letters with long vowels /aa, uw, iy/ in the early stages of reading development to help discriminate the long and short forms of the same vowel.

The workbook, that supplements the Fall basal reader, contains listening, reading, tracing, and composing exercises. The learners practice additional combining, analyzing letters, words, and sentences, gap filling exercises, practice reading and writing long and short vowels letters, and practice copying and spelling.

The Spring basal reader starts with a review of words, short and long sentences. Then they go through a series of units. Each unit has a theme and 20-40 words paragraphs consisting of short sentences and accompanied by a picture, followed by 3 comprehension questions. Each lesson contains a word identification exercise that requires them to match and classify words focusing on a particular grapheme. They read sets of words, note and write the same grapheme on the line under the word. They also fill the gaps in short sentences. A speaking and oral expression activity is included. [The learners learn to read the two forms of the definite article, nunation, gemination diacritical marks, the different forms of /t/ in word final position, demonstrative and personal pronouns and question words.](#) Decoding and writing are practiced side by side. The learners analyze words into their component letters in their relevant boxes. At the end of each theme, the learners do vocabulary enriching exercises and the book ends with a review. By the end of Grade1, the students are able to decode.

Developing Reading in Grade 2

The Fall and Spring basal readers have the same design. The Fall basal begins with a review of the what was learned in Grade1. Each basal reader consists of a series of units each of which consisting of a title, a picture, a reading text, and "My dictionary". Before the reading, the teacher asks questions about the picture that precedes the text. She reads the text out loud, explains the meaning of the new words using the "My Dictionary" page, and discusses the ideas in the text. The teacher introduces the students to the dictionary, shows them how to look up a word and circle the correct meaning. The students explain meanings of sentences in their own words. They answer a 3-item true/false or multiple

choice comprehension questions. They listen to and repeat sentences while looking at their written form. They blend syllables and letters to make words. They fill gaps in sentences; use words in sentences; and fill in the missing letter in pairs of words that require recognition of different letter forms and practice spelling. They trace and copy single letter. In the listening and speaking activity, they tell what they see and answer questions about a picture. They practice the singular and plural forms of the nouns, subject verb agreement in number or gender. In the "discovery" activity, they color, find pictures or answer background knowledge questions.

In the Spring basal reader, the students do additional activities that require them to read a short paragraph out loud, match questions with answers, rearrange words to make sentences, match sentence segments with their complements, match a word with its synonym or antonym, focus on simple grammatical structures such as re-writing 2-word sentences changing the subject pronoun from singular to plural, from the third to the first person, or masculine to feminine. A test is given every 2 units.

In Grade2, 22% of the exercises focus on developing reading vocabulary, and equal percentages focus on word identification and spelling (See Table 2).

Developing Reading in Grades 3-6

Each basal reader is an integrated course in which listening, speaking, reading and writing skills are developed in context based on the text theme. The basal readers have the same design. Each basal contains units that cover all the teaching weeks (See Table 1). Each unit has a title, a picture, a reading text in which new words are highlighted, a list of new words and their meanings, a series of reading comprehension questions, oral reading, word identification, vocabulary, grammar, spelling and dictation, speaking and composing exercises.

In grades 3-6, more than half the exercises are devoted to comprehension. Reading comprehension exercises increase and word identification and spelling exercises decrease as the students progress from one grade level to the next (See Table 2). The lower grades focus is on literal comprehension only. In grades 5 & 6, and the students infer the topic of the whole text and of each paragraph and the end of a story (3.27% and 5.82% respectively).

Word identification exercises require the students to read aloud, examine a specific grapheme in several examples, locate words containing certain graphemes in the text, blend graphemes and syllables to make words, write the missing graphemes in words,

analyze words into syllables, read and note the difference in pairs of words differing in one grapheme, read whole words and isolate certain graphemes, fill in letters in a simple crossword puzzle and so on. However, students do not practice words in which a written grapheme has no corresponding phoneme or words in which the spoken sound is not represented by a grapheme. Less emphasis is placed on certain diacritical marks.

Table (2)

% of Exercises Allocated to Language Skills and Elements

	Grade2		Grade3		Grade4		Grade5		Grade6	
Comprehension	30	7.4%	186	49.79%	264	50.77%	305	55.69%	326	60.82%
Word identification	53	13%	18	4.79%	16	3.08%	27	4.95%	26	4.85%
Spelling	57	14%	20	5.32%	29	5.58%	13	2.38%	8	1.49%
Oral reading	24	5.89%	13	3.46%	10	1.92%	-	-	3	.55%
Listening	25	6.14%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Oral Expression (speak + pronunciation)	53	13%	9	2.39%	6	1.15%	11	2.01%	9	1.68%
Composing (writing)	33	8.1%	15	3.99%	19	3.65%	22	4.02%	19	3.54%
Vocabulary	90	22.1%	78	20.74%	111	21.35%	111	20.37%	89	16.6%
Grammar	18	4.42	24	6.38%	37	7.11%	36	6.61%	41	7.65%
Penmanship	24	5.89%	13	3.46%	28	5.38%	19	3.49%	14	2.61%
Total Questions & Exercises	407		376		520		545		536	

Vocabulary is an important component of the reading curriculum. The amount of new words in a text increases from three new words per text in Grade 2 to 10 words per text in Grade 6 (See Table 1). Word meaning is provided in a table after the passage. No practice in deriving meaning from context is provided. Passages contain other difficult words that are not included in the table. About one fifth of the exercises is allocated to developing reading vocabulary (See Table 2). In all grade levels, vocabulary exercises require students to fill gap, use vocabulary in sentences, give synonyms and antonyms, give the meaning, rearrange words to make sentences and classify words into categories.

There is more focus on grammar in context (structural and morphemic analysis) as the students grow older (See Table 2). [They change nouns and pronouns from singular to plural and masculine to feminine, and mark subjects and verbs, and nouns and adjectives](#)

for number and gender. These grow in complexity and amount through the grades. Composing exercises require the students to write few sentences in the early grades and short paragraphs in the upper grades. Likewise, speaking exercises require students to look at a picture and/or answer questions related to the reading topic orally. Spelling is practiced in 2 ways. First a text is presented to the students, who listen to the teacher read selected words or phrases, and they recognize them. Then parts of the reading text are dictated to the students. Finally, penmanship starts with tracing in the lower grades, copying in middle grades and writing sentences in two styles in the upper grades (See Table 2).

Table (3)
Distribution of Reading Themes

	Gr2	Gr3	Gr4	Gr5	Gr6
Narrative	40	23	25	10	9
Expository	-	11	18	27	27
Total texts	40	34	43	37	36

The reading texts vary in theme, length and difficulty level within each basal reader and from grade level to the next (See Table 1). However, these variations are random. All topics are narrative in Grade2, and more expository in grade 6 (75%). Narrative topics decrease as the students grow older (67.65% in Grade 3, 58% in Grade 4, 27% in Grade 5 and 25% in Grade 6). Between 18% and 29% are poems. Below is a list of all the themes in the Fall basal reader.

- i. **Grade2 themes:** *A Supplication, New School Year, Meeting With Friends, In The Classroom, In My Home Library, The Bee and The Flower, Who Am I, The Computer, Our Flag, My Homeland, Serving My Home Country, How Seeds Grow Into Plants, Keeping The Street Clean, The Fox Doctor, On The Beach.* The poems have the following themes: *My Language, The Bee, My Great Country, The Muslim's Song, My Family, The Farmer, My Prayer, My Teeth, and Success.*
- ii. **Grade3 themes:** *Obey You Parents, The Boy and The Field, The Monkey Doctor, What Would You Like To Be, Praying for Rain, Work in Islam, With My Father, Your Diet, Saeed and The Guests, Cleanliness, The Horse Race, Riyadh.* The poems have the following themes: *The Morning Song, Knowing God, When The Bird Sings, Parents, A Child Talking about Himself.*

- iii. **Grade 4 themes:** *How I Spent The Summer Holiday, The Ant And The Wheat, Be Careful, Our Good Land, The Tree, Etiquette, Jubail, The Nightingale, Live Examples, The Class Reward, Learn From Birds, Roads Are for Travelers, in The School Library.* The poems' topics are: *The Arabic Language, Muslim Unity, Thanks Dad, God's Creation.*
- iv. **Grade 5 themes:** *Your Duties Towards God and Others (Quran), Be Good To People (Hadith), Our Summer Resort, Respect Your Teacher, Abdul-Rahman Bin Awf, Manpower, Extracurricular Activities, Ahmed Bin Hanbal, The Pigeon, Jazan, Our Urban Development, Pure Water, Public Facilities.* The poems have the following themes: *The Lamb And The Wolf, Muslim Youth, Advice, A Soldier's Letter To His Mother, To Students.*
- v. **Grade 6 themes:** *Supplication Of Abraham (Quran), The Dove And Hunter, Be Kind-Hearted (Hadith), Our Scenic Country, Saladin, Children in Islam, Oil, Learner's Etiquette, Do Not Pollute Your Environment, Safiya, Our Ancient Ruins, Pilgrimage.* The poems have the following themes: *Words of Wisdom, My Library, The Rich and The Poor, Holy Ka'aba.*

Most topics are familiar, they are boring and they **do not expand the students' world**. The ideas are written in generalized statements and lack specific details. Stories and fables are more interesting and richer in details than topics about *the summer holiday, school or library* and so on. Some topics are repeated across the grades such as those about *water, library, the dove and hunter, the monkey doctor, respecting parents, Arabic language, my country, Muslim brotherhood* and so on. Topics about cities in the Kingdom and biographies are similar to those they study in the history and geography or religion classes. Very few themes talk about science and technology. Most of the passages have a preaching tone.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The elementary national reading curriculum in Saudi Arabia provides for the sequential development of the reading skills. Reading and literacy development goes through four stages: readiness (pre-reading), initial reading and decoding in grade 1 and middle of grade 2, consolidation and fluency in grades 2 and 3, and reading to learn in grades 4-6.

The elementary reading program in Saudi Arabia is based on the philosophy that spoken, read, and written language must flow naturally from the child and must be used in

meaningful ways to communicate real needs. The basal readers use a balanced approach: analytic, synthetic, and whole word phonics, whole language and language experience. This philosophy is supported by prior studies. Reyhner (2001) indicated that balanced approaches draw on both phonics and whole-language methods and that in balanced approaches, teachers can supplement basal readers with community and local reading materials. Foorman et al. (1991) found that learners who received more letter-sound instruction showed more spelling and reading improvement, and Foes & Sloan (1999) found that direct phonics gave grade 1 and 2 students the strategies to become independent readers when combined with a program using whole reading experiences with peer and parental involvement.

Reading instruction in Saudi Arabia is whole-class instruction and basal readers do not provide for individual students' needs at the frustration and accelerated levels. The basals contain as many units as the teaching weeks. No supplementary remedial or enriching materials are provided. In this respect, Ediger (1999) indicated that needs differ from student to student. A learner might need little or no phonics to identify unknown words. Another might need much phonics to become a proficient reader. Based on needs, several individual programs of instruction should be adopted: Reading recovery, basal texts (carefully chosen), library books, Big Books and experience charts for early primary grade pupils.

The elementary reading program in Saudi Arabia emphasizes word identification, comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. In grades 2-6, the students learn, 114, 190, 244, 257 and 233 reading vocabulary items respectively. However, there is no evidence that these vocabulary items are needed by the students, whether they are unfamiliar with them, whether they are familiar with the rest of the words in the reading texts, and whether the vocabulary exercises provided are sufficient for learning them. In a study by Stallman et al. (1990), second- and fifth-grade children already knew more than 70% of the "new" words in basal readers one and two years beyond their grade level. Ryder & Graves (1994) also found that words targeted for instruction were already known; and much of the instruction was insufficient to improve comprehension. Instruction was not necessarily suited to targeted words and their contexts. In addition, Walsh (2003) indicated that basal readers waste time by including too many lessons on formal reading comprehension skills; and miss opportunities to develop word and world knowledge by offering mostly incoherent, banal themes rather than content-rich themes.

Although standardized reading curriculum and teaching approaches are used in the Saudi elementary schools, standards for the frustration, instructional and accelerated levels need to be set and standardized reading tests need to be developed in order to test the effectiveness of the basal readers and reading instruction provided to see whether the students' needs are met. Student and teacher surveys can be administered to collect data about the reading problems, effectiveness of the basal readers and teaching approaches prescribed in them, children's favorite themes, and aspects of word identification and comprehension that receive more or less attention. Metacognitive reading strategies and techniques can be taught to the students during basal reading instruction. Web-based reading materials and activities may also be used as a supplement to the basal readers. Out of class independent reading - which is currently lacking - must be encouraged as well. This way, Saudi elementary students will become independent readers and enjoy reading in and outside school.

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