

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**SYRIAN REFUGEE STUDENTS' READING STATUS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN JORDAN: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES**

**BASELA MOFLEH HASSAN MAHASNEH<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education/ Jordan

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**Abstract**

The aim of the study was to shed light on the English language reading status of Syrian refugee learners in Jordanian schools from the perception of their English language teachers. In this study, the features of the school, and the scope of curriculum applied to Syrian children, and the problems within the education process were examined according to teachers' views. The study followed a descriptive quantitative research design by using a questionnaire. The study sample are 55 English language teachers who were randomly selected. It was found that a high agreement of teachers' views on the low reading ability of Syrian refugee students due to educational, social, cognitive and institutional factors. It was found that teachers lack pedagogical experience and have some literacy problems. Students are demotivated because of their social situation as a result of was. Lack of parental and maternal education and follow up contributed to the learners' low abilities in the reading skill. More importantly, the lack of exposure to language as a result of lesson duration and the afternoon phase affects students' literacy, especially reading. Based on the results of the study, it is suggested that refugees' education be carried out along with the Jordanian students and that teachers working at these schools be equipped with an acceptable level of teaching skills.

**Key Words:** Syrian refugees, Literacy, reading abilities

## Introduction

Literacy development in English as a foreign language (EFL) has caught the interests of numerous researchers all over the globe since English is the dominant medium of communication among languages. This widespread of English is derived from the fact that English is used for teaching purposes, pursuing higher studies, understanding foreign cultures, reading foreign press, communication with English speaking people, and for professional and business matters.

Literacy growth in EFL, particularly the reading skill, is a prerequisite for success. Reading stands behind academic, social and economic success. In order to accomplish success, one needs to have good reading and comprehension skills. Without these skills, children will struggle to grow academically exposing themselves and the community to serious problems. Bialystok (2001) stresses that “reading is the primary source of knowledge transmission and expression, and if this exchange takes place in a weak language or depends on compromised skills, the consequences for children’s education are obvious” p.174.

A large strand of previous studies (Devkota, Giri& Bagale (2017); Fitriani (2019) and Taopan& Drajadi (2020)) is interested in identifying the challenges and opportunities of EFL in the context of different nations and regions. According to Lertola & Mariotti (2017), EFL stands for those people who have a first language or native language, but want to master English as their foreign language. Similarly, Nordquist (2020) defines English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as the term used to describe the study of English by non-native speakers in countries where English is not the dominant language.

Steady et al (2017) points out that reading disability can cause health problems which may lead to challenges in school and workplace causing financial load on communities. There are many factors that may hinder EFL development such as first language interference, the contrasting features that exist between the mother tongue and the second language, the degree of complexity of the second language, and the learner-based factors (Gass and Selinker 2008). One more factor that may affect language acquisition is crises such as wars.

Because of the near borders to Syria, according to the World Food Program (WFP), Jordan received millions of Syrian refugees as a result of the Syrian war. Syrian children’s education has been a huge challenge to the Jordanian educational system. Similarly, they face crucial challenges that accompany wars, travel and asylum, as well. If EFL is linked to the Syrian refugees, it becomes an intriguing research issue (Karam, Kibler, & Yoder, 2017).

Similarly, Evans and Fitzgerald (2017) carried out a research on Syrian refugees living in the USA and their obstacles in learning EFL. They came across the fact that most of the Syrian refugees were stripped of their basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, education, and medicine. This presents confronts to their learning. Also, most of the Syrian refugees face challenges in getting employed, which causes severe financial crisis. In the face of financial, economic, social, and educational challenges, most of the Syrian refugees could not complete their learning.

There are discrepancies in research findings regarding the Syrian refugee learners' literacy development in English language. Many studies that are conducted in the native English-speaking countries where Syrians search for asylum find positive progress in English literacy as a result of language exposure. However, most studies focusing on refugees in non-native speaking English like Turkey and Jordan conclude negative impacts on English literacy development. Some of these studies recommend further research regarding solutions for problems Syrian refugee learners encounter.

Before exploring the status of reading in English of the Syrian refugee learners in Jordan, a description of their situation in the public education in Jordan is provided. Most of the Syrian refugee students join public schools in the afternoon phase which starts at 12:30 p.m. and ends at 5.00 p.m. from Sunday to Thursday p.m. On Saturdays, schools start at 8:00 a.m. and finishes at 12.30. The time duration of every period is 35 minutes.

Among the factors that may contribute to the refugees' low reading abilities is the time students spend at school. Primary factors are social factors (poverty, parental education status, feeling alien), exposure to English, phonological awareness, orthographic awareness, lack of vocabulary repertoire and motivation. Verhoeven et al (2017) points out that orthographic learning, phonology awareness and exposure to vocabulary help to add important knowledge to reading comprehension.

This study is set to understand the reading status of Syrian refugee learners in Jordan in light of these factors by exploring the perspectives of their teachers.

### **Statement of the problem**

Based on the researcher's experience as a supervisor of EFL, the researcher noticed that most Syrian refugee students have reading problems in English which may lead to lack of their English language literacy growth. Teachers often complain about the weakness of their students in learning English language.

### **Questions of the study**

The study attempts to answer the following question:

1. What are teachers' perspectives towards English language low reading abilities of Syrian refugee learners?

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the following objective:

1. Teachers' perspectives of English language reading status of the Syrian refugee students in Amman region.

### **Significance of the study**

This study derives its significance from the fact that:

- 1) Teachers' perspectives toward the reading status of the Syrian refugee students in English as a foreign language has not been investigated before.

## Limitation of the study

One limitation of the study is the time constraint which made it difficult to implement it on a large scale. Only 10 items were inquired about teachers' attitudes toward reading status of Syrian refugee learners. The sample of the study are teachers of Syrian refugee phase in three directorates (Amman Qasabah, Marka and Wadi Al Seir) in Amman district. The results represent the population of the study.

## Review of literature

Many studies have been conducted on the Syrian refugee students from the start of their asylum which shed light on the problems they face as a result of their current situation in the EFL context, our major concern. Steele (2017) conducted a study which focuses on the case of Syrian refugees in the context of Turkey, highlighting the need for English language teaching before resettlement. The study addresses some of the administrative, cultural, and psychological challenges pertinent to this situation. The study recommends inclusive approach to Turkish language and culture as well as rethinking of curriculum choices and classroom instructions.

Karakus (2019) conducts a similar study on Syrian refugee students in Turkey which aims at shedding light on the situations of teachers and students and their perception of the atmosphere in a school where Turkish children are educated in the morning while Syrian refugee students are educated in the afternoon which coincides with their situation in the present study. The problems within the education process are examined according to teachers' as well as to students' views. The researcher follows the qualitative research design using interviews. The sample of the study consists of 16 participants (12 refugee students and 4 Syrian teachers) at the school. It is found that teaching has not been the original job of most of the teachers due to their financial troubles; students have forgotten some part of what they have learned due to several years of gap in their education and that most of these students carried with them the psychological effects of the war. The study recommends that refugees' curricula be prepared according to their needs, and that teachers working at these schools be equipped with an acceptable level of teaching skills.

In the Jordanian context, AlKhawaldeh (2018) carries out a qualitative study concerning educational challenges Syrian refugee children face with possible solutions to overcome them. The sample consists of twenty-four participants (twelve Syrian refugee teachers and twelve Syrian refugee parents) who respond to an open questionnaire. The major findings of the study are lack of achievement among refugee children, lack of devotion to school learning responsibilities, and insufficient refugee teacher training. According to Syrian refugee parents, most of these challenges encompass deterioration in instructional achievement, lack of school assignments, carelessness to achieve well in Math and English, lack of high qualifications among refugee parents and difference in interest in French in Syria and English in Jordan. The study recommends strengthening school-parents communication, training refugee teachers and tackling refugee children's psychological problems.

A similar study held by Alefsha and Al Jamal (2019) aims at identifying challenges of teaching EFL to Syrian refugees, and the solutions to these problems. The study followed the qualitative research design. The data are collected by a semi-structured interview with ten Syrian refugees, a director of resettlement agency, an EFL manager, and one an EFL instructor. The study comes out with four challenges that refugee learners encounter (social, educational, financial, and institutional). Educational challenges, our concern, were mainly as a result of a poor educational background, discomfort with English Language, lack of knowledgeable teachers to deal with the Syrian refugees, and lack of motivation. This study recommends using a curriculum of EFL designed for Syrian refugees.

While the available literature has contributed greatly on shedding light on challenges Syrian refugee learners encounter in the Arab context, researches in the Canadian or English native speaking countries' context come to different conclusions regarding English literacy development. Baddour (2020) in his Masters' Thesis examines the performance of Syrian refugee children and youth in word reading, vocabulary and reading comprehension in Arabic and English over a one-year time period using the Simple View of Reading model. Findings suggest that one school year of English instruction enhanced students' English performance and reduced the gap between them and their monolingual peers. Evidence of Arabic language progress is also demonstrated. Moreover, age and parental education were among the factors predicting English and Arabic language proficiency. The researcher recommends to promote Arabic and English language and literacy skills in school-aged Syrian refugees.

Equivalently, Paradis et al (2020) conduct a research examining the role of language environmental factors, alongside age and cognitive factors, in shaping the Arabic-L1 and English-L2 of recently arrived Syrian refugee children in Canada. The researchers find that Arabic is the primary home language with some English use among siblings. Children do not engage frequently in language-rich activities in either language, especially literacy activities in Arabic. Parent education levels are low: most have primary school only. Hierarchical regression models reveal that stronger non-verbal reasoning skills, more exposure to English at school, more sibling interaction in English, more frequent engagement in language-rich activities in English, and higher maternal and paternal education are associated with larger English vocabularies and greater accuracy with verb morphology. Arabic vocabulary and morphological abilities are predicted by older age (i.e., more L1 exposure), stronger non-verbal reasoning skills and maternal education. The researchers concluded that Syrian refugee learners has successfully acquired English as a result of their exposure to it in the formal instruction at school. Meanwhile, the major concern in this study is their reading development in the Jordanian context.

Based on the literature review, it is noticed that most Syrian refugee students have encountered many difficulties when they left their country as a result of war looking for safety. Consequently, they are in front of cultural, educational, social and financial gaps that lead to low English literacy (especially reading) growth. The researcher has benefited from these studies through the methodology they follow, the theoretical literature review and in the development of the instrument.



## **Method and procedures**

The current study seeks to contribute a better understanding of the low reading status of the Syrian refugee learners in English in Jordanian schools and the factors behind that through using a mixture of a descriptive quantitative and a qualitative research.

### **Participants and population of the Study**

Participants of the study are 55 EFL teachers (25 females, 30 males). They were chosen randomly from Amman district (Amman Qasabah, Marka and Wadi AlSeir) in the 1<sup>st</sup> semester of the academic year 2020/2021. The link of the questionnaire is sent to WhatsApp groups of English language teachers who teach Syrian refugees. The instructions are discussed before the questionnaire.

The population of the study are the Syrian refugee English language teachers in Amman district.

### **Instrument of the study**

Based on previous research and instruments, the researcher develops a questionnaire and makes telephone calls with some participants. The questionnaire consists of 10 items to detect teachers' attitudes toward the reasons behind Syrian refugee learners' low reading abilities of English as a foreign language in Jordan. The researcher classifies them into: educational (items 3, 4), social (items 7,8), cultural (items 1,2,6) and institutional items (5, 9,10).

The questionnaire is built using the Google Forms and is sent to the participants through emails and What's App.

The responses to these items range from strongly agree to strongly disagree in a 5-point scale. (See Appendix A). Some teachers provide some notes and examples at the end of the questionnaire. The Data is received on the Google Forms. Excel sheets are used to build the tables. The data is analyzed using the SPSS.

The researcher distributes the questionnaire to Syrian refugee EFL teachers in Amman district (Amman Qasabah, Marka and Wadi AlSeir Directorates of education) in the 1<sup>st</sup> semester of the academic year 2020/2021. The instructions are discussed before the questionnaire.

### **Findings and discussion**

The research question asks about the teachers' perspectives towards the status of English low reading skills of Syrian refugee students in Jordanian schools and the factors behind it. In order to answer this question, the researcher calculates the means and the standard deviations of the items in the questionnaire. The results are presented in table 1.

Table (1): Means, standard deviations and the rank of teachers' perspectives towards the factors of English low reading abilities of Syrian refugee students in Jordanian schools.

		N	Mean	SD	Rank
Q1	I think that some Syrian refugee students suffer from low cognitive abilities	55	3.78	0.90	6
Q2	I think that some Syrian refugee students have dyslexia.	54	3.70	0.86	7
Q3	I think that Syrian refugee students have poor phonological and orthographic abilities which affect their reading development.	55	3.67	0.92	8
Q4	I think that Syrian refugee student's vocabulary knowledge affects their reading comprehension.	55	4.09	0.89	1
Q5	I think that the curriculum in Jordan does not fit Syrian students' previous knowledge.	55	3.15	1.04	10
Q6	I think that exposing to a different culture in Jordan causes anxiety to Syrian students so demotivates them for learning.	55	3.20	1.16	9
Q7	I believe that students' social factors (war, poverty, family worries....) affect their reading skill.	55	3.93	0.92	4
Q8	I believe that parents' education status affect students' reading development.	55	4.02	1.08	3
Q9	I feel that time students spend at school influence their reading ability.	55	3.89	0.85	5
Q10	I think that teachers' English literacy level affects students' English reading development.	55	4.09	0.78	2
	AVERAGE		3.75	0.52	

Table 1 shows that the total level of teachers' perspectives towards low reading abilities is highly positive as the mean is 3.75. The table also shows that the highest mean is 4.9 and the lowest mean is 3.15 with standard deviations that range between 1.16 to 0.78. For ease of interpretation, in table 1, the items are set out in a descending order from the one which most teachers agree with, to the one which few teachers agree with. This result clarifies the crucial role of teachers' attitudes toward Syrian refugees low reading abilities in English. The teachers' responses to most of the items in the questionnaire show a high level of agreement that Syrian refugee students have low reading abilities in English language.

It is clear that item 4 scores the highest average. Most teachers agree that Syrian refugee students have reading comprehension disabilities attributed to lack of vocabulary knowledge. Some teachers attribute this to lack of vocabulary exposure in different contexts. The new lexical items are used once or twice. Consequently, students lack the natural interactions so their vocabulary acquisition is badly affected. This finding coincides with the findings of Baddour (2020) and Paradis et al (2020) in English language acquisition in Canada. Because of the widely exposure to English, the majority speaking language, Syrian refugee students develop their language repertoire. So, the more the students are exposed to language, the better they acquire it. This illustrates that the low reading status is due to lack of exposure in this study and the study of Al Kawaldeh (2018) and Alefisha(2019).

The 2<sup>nd</sup> highest average is scored to item 10 regarding teachers' literacy of English. The average of responses is 4.09. This implies that the majority of teachers themselves agree that they lack literacy of English content and pedagogy. This finding matches the findings of AlKawaldeh (2018) In fact, teachers of the afternoon phase are appointed with a yearly contract from those newly graduated who lack training and teaching experience with a salary of 220 JDs. This finding approves the findings of Karakus (2019) who points out that English language teachers of the Syrian refugees in Turkey are originally not teachers, but they accept this low paid job for financial problems.

The least influential factor on students' reading abilities according to teachers' perspective is curriculum, an institutional factor which stands for item 5. Most teachers agree that the curriculum (mean of 3.15) has not to do with students' low ability reading skills to some extent. This finding is different from Alefsha and Al Jamal (2019) and Karakus (2019) who recommended designing a curriculum that fits the needs of Syrian refugee students.

Other literacy influencing factors on low reading abilities are lack of phonological and orthographical knowledge. This item scores 3.69 mean. Most teachers agree that students with poor phonological knowledge and orthography have reading difficulties. This finding matches the findings of Verhoeven et al (2017). One respondent gives examples of the English sounds "thought and ought / though and laugh) explaining that the similarities of orthography but different in pronunciation may cause reading problems to the students. She adds more examples that encounter her like "seat and eat vs. search", "this vs. three ". This is attributed to lack of phonology and orthography instruction in the public school context, especially the afternoon phases.

More contributing factors to low reading abilities of Syrian refugee students in English are social factors. Items 8 and 7 scored the 3<sup>rd</sup> rank with a mean of 4.02 and item 7 scored the 4<sup>th</sup> rank with a mean of 3.93, respectively. This indicates that the social status of the students and their parents including poverty, parents' education, family worries, loss of parents because of war, and alienation as a result of their home departure have a great influence on Syrian refugee learners' literacy development, particularly reading. This can be explained with the lack of parents' follow up of their children at school and their busyness of saving food, shelter and other basic needs. These findings agree with the findings of Evans and Fitzgerald (2017) and Alefsha &



Al Jamal (2019). These findings support Riches' & Genesee's (2006) conclusions regarding literacy experiences such as family literacy.

Other factors may be linked to children's literacy status. Items 1, 2 are concerned with students' cognition. They scored a mean of 3.78 and 3.70, respectively. This shows an agreement that some students have cognition abilities and dyslexia.

More institutional contributing factors to their low status of reading in English is the time they spend at school. As mentioned earlier in this research, the Syrian refugee students join their schools in the afternoon phase with 35 minutes long of the lesson period. Teachers' perspectives reveal that this has a great impact on student's language acquisition. As can be seen from the table, item 9 came in the 5<sup>th</sup> rank with a mean of approximately 3.9. Starting in the afternoon and ending at the end of the daytime, especially winter days, seems to be not appropriate time for learning. They return exhausted, consequently, they go to bed early deprived from the play time as well as doing homework and follow up. This indicates that time students spend at school reduces their exposure to language and deprives them from their family follow up, consequently affects their language acquisition.

While this study specifically focuses on teachers' perspectives regarding the low status of reading in English of Syrian refugees in Jordan, there is an agreement with many researches (AlKhawaldeh (2018), Alefsha(2019) and Karkas (2020) that refugee learners in neighboring countries to Syria(Turkey and Jordan) encounter challenges that affect their English language acquisition in one way or another because of different factors.

## Conclusions

The results show that Syrian Refugee learners face many challenges that affect their English language acquisition. Most of the respondents agree that these students have cognitive disabilities that prevents them from reading comprehension. Other primary factors are vocabulary knowledge, phonological and orthographic awareness have to do with their reading abilities. This low status is attributed to the social factors that accompanied war and lack of parental and maternal literacy which prevent them from continuous follow up at home. One more thing is that learners' feeling of alienation affects their intrinsic motivation to learn.

It is highly recommended that Syrian children and their parents set for social, financial and psychological support to heal their suffering of the crisis. Teachers of English for the Syrian refugees have to set for extensive pedagogical training. A longer lesson period is advised on the part of the MoE for more language exposure by making refugees' education carried out along with the Jordanian students. Further research is advised on literacy development on a large scale.

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