

# The "Power of ONE" Campaign in the U.A.E.

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How can you encourage a whole country to read? This is the challenge being taken up by a team of teachers to turn a newly-literate population into one that reads as a habit. We discuss the great strides made, and the enormous challenges that still lie ahead, in the areas of professional development, networking, publishing and the development of organisations and institutions in the 'Power of ONE'. This campaign celebrates local teacher-led initiatives with the aim of spreading "best practice" one student, teacher and school at a time until everyone becomes a reader.

Many Arab nations, particularly Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, have developed at a staggering pace. In most major economic indicators, in health and in education, countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have made great progress and can consider themselves highly developed. Luxury cars speeding past impressive glass and steel structures in Doha, Jeddah and Dubai hide a few uncomfortable facts, however. In literacy, the Arab world in general lags behind but, more significantly, even where improvements have been made in literacy, few people read as a habit.

Advances in literacy in the United Arab Emirates have been staggering. Literacy rates have shot up from estimates of less than 20% over 50 years ago, to about 43% in 1971, when the nation was born, to 90% overall in 2005 (U.I.S., 2011). However, despite high levels of literacy, few have adopted the reading habit. Anecdotal evidence from universities of students unwilling and possibly unable to read basic textbooks, as well as low circulation rates in libraries, are matched with the following statistics from the UNDP (2003) report *Building a Knowledge Society*:

in the first half of the 1980s ... the average number of books translated per 1 million people in the Arab world during the 5-year period was 4.4 (less than one book for every million Arabs), while in Hungary it was 519, and in Spain 920. (p.67); Book production in Arab countries was just 1.1 percent of world production, although Arabs constitute 5% of the world's population. (p.77); the almost total absence of reading classes in schools, [is] apparently the result of "not having enough time to teach the basic curricula" (p.78)

As is to be expected, the relatively affluent youth of the U.A.E. and other Gulf states also enjoy the distractions offered by modern technological devices, from Xbox to the PC, which may offer a variety of reading experiences, but rarely challenge readers to engage in the cognitive demands of texts that extend beyond one screen.

In short, a wide range of factors conspire against students in the UAE from developing a reading habit. Although this is not true of all nationality or language groups or for some individuals, it is a fair generalisation to make that most young Arab-speaking students arrive at UAE universities with almost no experience of extensive reading. Some evidence suggests that reading is an ignored skill: "In 2008, a survey by the UN revealed that the average Arab in the Middle East reads approximately four pages worth of literature a year, whereas Americans read an average of 11 books a year" (Ahmad, 2010, para. 6). When young Arab nationals enter English-medium universities, poor reading skills put them at a distinct disadvantage. Reading and writing scores in IELTS are more than half a band below the average Speaking score (see Table 1), providing evidence for the stereotype of an 'oral' culture that values face-to-face contact over the written word.

Table 1. IELTS Band scores in Academic Paper for Selected Countries (Adapted from IELTS, 2010)

COUNTRY	LISTENING	READING	WRITING	SPEAKING	OVERALL
OVERALL FEMALE	6.1	6.1	5.6	5.9	6.0
OVERALL MALE	5.9	5.9	5.4	5.8	5.8
QATAR	4.8	4.6	4.5	5.3	4.9
SAUDI ARABIA	5	4.9	4.7	5.7	5.1
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	5	4.8	4.7	5.4	5.1
BRAZIL	6.8	6.9	6.2	6.8	6.7
CHINA	5.7	5.9	5.2	5.3	5.6
JAPAN	6	6	5.3	5.7	5.8
KOREA	6.1	6.1	5.3	5.7	5.9
TURKEY	6	6	5.5	6	5.9

The leadership of the country, through the UAE Ministry of Education, has certainly recognised the need to improve standards of education, and in the latest of a series of initiatives has introduced teaching mentors into schools. While some progress has been made, a focus on increasing access to IT has not prioritised extensive reading.

The result is that some of the best students graduate from high school with poor reading habits and study skills. However, dealing with the problem of a lack of reading habit at university is a case of 'locking the stable door after the horse has bolted.' Remedial action in university foundation programmes, primarily designed to improve skills in academic English, can do little to reverse more than 10 years of poor reading habits. It was from this realisation that the 'Power of ONE' was born.

### The Power of ONE

Rising to the challenge of developing a reading habit in the United Arab Emirates, Tom Le Seelleur, an English language teacher who has worked in the Emirates since July 2002, instigated the 'Power of ONE' campaign. Quite simply, 'The Power of ONE' harnesses the energy of change through each person contributing to major change in society by making a small change in their lives. The Power of ONE campaign has the vision to create a reading culture in the U.A.E. and the Middle East:

- 📖 One in every Emirate
- 📖 One in every major city
- 📖 One in every town and village
- 📖 One in every community and library
- 📖 One in every nursery, school, college and university
- 📖 One in every classroom
- 📖 One in every home
- 📖 Everyone
- 📖 Everyone needs to know that the U.A.E. is reading.

That is, the campaign is focussed on grass-root changes, starting from individual children, parents and teachers. This campaign does not demand large-scale government or ministry involvement, but aims to tackle the lack of reading habit from homes, libraries and schools. The Power of ONE has been inspired by developments in the U.K. particularly through the National Literacy Trust's National Year of Reading, which has been superseded by Reading for Life and Words for Life (National Literacy Trust, 2011a) and Reading Champions (National Literacy Trust, 2011b), and has borrowed liberally from the resources and best practices offered there.

## Strategies

In order to carry out the Power of ONE campaign, a small team based at Khalifa University, Sharjah, identified a number of strategies to reach the target audience of classroom teachers in primary and secondary schools. The main approaches are: workshops and presentations in schools and at conferences; the setting up of an organisation; the publication of a magazine; and the development of electronic resources. The following sections evaluate the success of these strategies to date.

### Presentations and Workshops

The Power of ONE campaign has delivered more than 15 workshops and presentations to more than 1000 teachers in the space of about 18 months. These always cover topics of practical relevance to classroom teachers and focus on ways that teachers can increase how much their students read. Reflecting local conditions, the workshops are organised during the working week. They are offered free to teachers, thanks to generous sponsorship by local bookshops, publishers and other organisations such as The British Council. Other presentations have also been made at major regional and international conferences.

Perhaps the most gratifying aspect of these workshops has been meeting participants from previous sessions, who then recount descriptions of successful reading programmes implemented in their own context. Without exception, these have resulted in improved reading habits for their students. Many of these teachers have then shared their experiences through READ magazine (see below) in the hope that they can further inspire others to take up the challenge.

### READ SIG

Under the auspices of TESOL Arabia, in January 2010 the Power of ONE campaign established READ SIG (Special Interest Group)—an organisation to bring together all teachers in the UAE who will commit to the Power of ONE campaign. Through international annual conferences and local chapter meetings, up to 600 TESOL Arabia members in the UAE committed themselves to engendering good reading habits.

The TESOL Arabia READ SIG proved to be an effective way of raising awareness of the Power of ONE campaign, and through the TESOL Arabia organisation we were able to reach a large number of people. However, this relationship came to an end in

2011, when it became clear that the interests of the two organisations were not aligned. The Power of ONE campaign intends to target all teachers associated with reading, and cannot afford to target just second or foreign language teachers of reading; the remit of the campaign is far wider. Various working practices of TESOL Arabia (such as restrictions on publications) also contributed to TESOL Arabia and the 'Power of ONE' campaign separating. Fortunately, READ SIG has been taken over by a team of committed TESOL teachers who will undoubtedly contribute to the aims of the campaign.

The Power of ONE campaign is actively seeking new partners to help raise awareness of the need for extensive reading in the UAE and beyond. The campaign has received favourable responses from various publishers, the International Association of Teachers of a Foreign Language (IATEFL), British Council, the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF), the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), Emirates Airlines International Festival of Literature (EAIFL) and Room to Read, and aims to establish working relationships with these and other like-minded organisations in the future.

### READ Magazine

March 2010 saw the first issue of READ magazine. The principle aim of the magazine is to spread good practice, and to inspire teachers and readers to establish practices that will encourage the reading habit in future generations in the UAE. The magazine welcomes contributions from classroom teachers, reading champions and reading experts. Contributors include Paul Nation, Peter Viney, Alan Pulverness, Isobel Aboulhoul, Charlie Higson, and Adrian Hayes alongside inspirational teachers from across the Middle East. With the publication of the third issue, READ magazine continues to inspire and is perhaps the most successful part of the campaign to date.

### Electronic Resources

A website and wiki, intended to reflect localised versions of the resources offered by the UK's National Literacy Trust at [www.literacytrust.org.uk/projects\\_networks](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/projects_networks), has been planned but has yet to be launched. The aim is to offer this important teacher resource from early 2012.

## Challenges

Despite the progress already made, there are significant challenges that lie ahead, not least in measuring the amount of reading that has been added as a result of the campaign. More practically, The Power of ONE campaign (or a similar organization) has yet to be made a formally recognized organization, with the prohibitive registration fee required for all charities in the UAE demanding significant sponsorship. We are currently seeking sponsors.

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