

Jordanian English Language Elementary Teachers' Beliefs About the Theoretical Orientations of Reading Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at examining the Jordanian English Language teachers' theoretical orientations of reading instruction as they relate to the three orientations of reading instruction, namely, Phonics, Skills, and Whole Language. A survey developed by Diane Deford (1985), Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP) was used. This study examined differences with regard to teachers' orientation as they relate to both their educational level and gender. Results have revealed that teachers who hold a bachelor degree tend to score higher than those who hold a bachelor degree. The results also revealed that female teachers tend to score higher than male teachers, this implies that female teachers are more knowledgeable or acquainted with the concept of whole language approach to reading instruction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading instruction and how to teach reading have long been debatable issues among educators and reading teachers. Feng (1992:1) states that "when to start reading instruction, how to teach beginning reading, and what is the best way to teach a young child to read are the issues that have been debated with intense and considerable rancor over the years." Two major inter-related factors that are at the heart of reading instruction are the role of reading teacher and teachers' theoretical orientations to reading instruction. Teachers' theoretical orientations and beliefs have been shown to be related to their classroom practices in the teaching of reading (Harste and Burke, 1977; Rupley and Logan, 1984).

Teachers believe that effective reading is important to make it explicit that the purpose of reading instruction enables their students to extract meaning from the written text; center their teaching around "shared texts", which some reading teachers use in their classroom as an enhancing reading tool to students with lower level of reading capabilities; teach aspects of reading/writing such as decoding and spelling in a systematic and structured way; emphasize the function of each language element to students and how it relates to their learning; and develop

strong and coherent personal philosophies about the teaching of reading (Morrison, 1997).

The role of the reading teacher is to immerse children in enticing literacy situations. It is the role of the reading teacher to be a facilitator of student learning, to allow children to discover new and multiple uses for reading and writing, and to expose them to dynamic language use both verbally and in print. The reading teacher has to create a learning atmosphere where students are "to interact with the text and with each other in authentic ways to construct new ideas" (Standeford, 1993: 39), and to create a wide range of reading and writing activities, all of which are necessary and which support learning in different ways (Pinnell, 1999). Under this atmosphere, students will be able to encounter opportunities to use language and to develop critical thinking skills. Besides, the role of the reading teacher is "to make reading a meaningful, enjoyable, useful and frequent experience for children" (Smith, 1986: 133).

Teachers' philosophical beliefs play an active role in determining the way in which they teach. Teachers' view of the reading process affects the decisions they make and influences the quality of reading instruction in the classroom (May, 1990). The key component of the teacher variable is the teacher's theoretical orientation that stems from his philosophical belief about reading instruction. Theoretical orientation is the "practical system of beliefs that helps establish a person's decision; in the area of reading, a teacher's theoretical orientation

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helps determine what instructional techniques and materials will be utilized in the classroom” (Moss, 1980: 2). Similarly, theoretical orientation has been viewed as “a particular knowledge and belief system about reading which strongly influences critical decision-making related to both the teaching and learning of reading (Harste and Burke, 1977: 4). In addition, theoretical orientation may influence a teacher's actions since this orientation directs perceptions and perceptions affect behaviors (DeFord, 1985).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are three theoretical orientations: phonics orientation, skills orientation, and whole language orientation. Phonics methods place heavy emphasis on letter-sound relationships; students are taught to “sound out” words when they are engaged in reading (Bright, 1989). The skills methods identify, sequence, and provide instruction in separate reading subskills. The whole language methods emphasize the integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Cushenbery, 1989).

Phonics Orientation

Definition of Phonics Orientation

The first orientation to reading instruction is known as phonics orientation. Teachers who believe in phonics orientation begin reading instruction with the letters of the alphabet and the sounds these letters represent (Reutzel and Cooter, 1992:50). They point out that “phonics or subskills teachers typically focus on formally and systematically in teaching children letter-sound relationships during the early stages of reading instruction. Because, according to a subskills instructional model, the most important skill to be learned in early reading is the ability to re-code the letters of print into the sounds of speech”. Besides, Reutzel and Cooter, (1992) emphasize that comprehension is considered an important skill in phonics approach, but children’s ability to comprehend depends mainly on associating sounds with the letters and connecting them with their oral language. In this sense, reading is viewed as both the decoding of words and comprehension.

In addition, Dechant (1993:296) stated “phonics is the study of the speech equivalents of printed symbols and the use of knowledge gained to identify and pronounce printed words. Phonics develops an understanding of the

relationship between the English language spelling system and the English sounding system”.

Bergeron (1990) gives a useful five-step strategy for decoding unfamiliar words in phonics instruction: use context clues; try the sound of the initial consonant, vowel, or blend in addition to context clues; check for structural clues; use phonics generalizations to sound out as much of the word as necessary and finally consult the dictionary.

Moreover, according to Levande (1988:9), phonics orientation is based on the notion that reading is speech coded by letters. Hence, instruction in phonics classroom should focus on decoding skills that are necessary for the readers. He states that “learners are initially taught the forms and names of letters. Next, learners are taught to associate the letters with the corresponding sounds that the letters represent. This is followed by instruction in blending known letters into words”.

Skills Orientation

Definition of Skills Orientation

The second orientation to reading is known as skills orientation. This orientation is based on the behaviorist psychology of learning that views literacy acquisition through direct instruction of discrete skills. This leads us to say that reading according to the skills orientation “is one of the four language arts and is composed of discrete skills to be taught one at a time” (Reutzel and Cooter, 1992: 48). Besides, the skills that are essential in this orientation and must be mastered by the children are decoding, vocabulary and comprehension.

Similarly, Feng (1993:13) states that in skills orientation “reading is treated as one of the four language arts which is taught separately from the others. Reading is viewed somewhat as a set of broad components consisting equally, in their treatment, of vocabulary, decoding, grammar, and comprehension”. Therefore, it is very essential in the skills approach that children need to be taught reading skills (i.e., word recognition, word identification, comprehension) in direct methods of instruction to create fluent readers. In this approach, both word recognition and word identification are considered as a base for the ultimate goal of reading which is comprehension.

There are several assumptions that are related to skills orientation to reading instruction. “First, reading is the sum of its parts or a skill + a skill + a skill...= reading.

Second, instruction is designed to teach each of the language-cueing components-decoding, context, and meaning-separately” (Reutzel and Cooter, 1992:49). Finally, readers have to interact with the texts they are reading in order to get the author’s message that exists there.

Skills orientation to reading is considered as a bottom-up orientation; “reading skills are seen as distinct units that can be taught in isolation, fluency in reading occurs when the learner has mastered a sufficient number of skills” (Levande, 1988:10).

Whole Language Orientation

Definition of Whole Language Orientation

Recently, a new orientation to reading instruction has emerged known as “Whole-language.” With regard to the whole language orientation, Feng (1992:2) states that:

Based on current research and knowledge about how children learn to read, teachers/educators launched a grass-roots whole language movement in the early 1980s. The term whole language has become a common buzzword for most educators and is a prominent theme in journal articles, books, conference presentations, publisher’s advertising and the media.

Whole language has been defined in different ways. Barron (1990:9) defines whole language as “a way of looking at children and how they learn. It is an attitude, a set of beliefs about how children learn”. Similarly, Goodman (1986:4) looks at whole language as “a set of beliefs about how language happens and a set of principles to guide classroom practice, and a whole language program is an educational program conducted by whole language teachers”. According to Watson (1989: 136), whole language is “a spirit, an enthusiasm for teaching and learning that is supported by beliefs about teaching and learning”. Cushenbery (1989:43) indicates that “whole language is not a precise, sequential new teaching approach but rather a change of attitude with regard to how children learn and how the different language arts are correlated into a meaningful set of learning experiences”.

To support the notion that whole language is a philosophy and a set of beliefs about language learning and language development, Bergeron (1990:319) states that whole language is a “concept that embodies both a philosophy of language development as well as the instructional approaches embodied within, and supportive of, that philosophy”.

3. METHOD

To examine the Jordanian English language elementary teachers’ beliefs about reading instruction, the researcher employed (TORP) instrument which was designed by Diane DeFord (1985) to clarify teachers’ beliefs about how children learn to read and how teachers believe reading should be taught. This instrument (TORP) consists of twenty-eight items rating on a five point Likert-type scale; SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; U = uncertain; A = agree; and SA = strongly agree.

This instrument (TORP) was designed and validated by DeFord in (1985) when she administered it to a sample of 90 teachers; 30 teachers for each group as holding phonics, skills, and whole language orientation to reading instruction. To ensure that teachers’ responses on the (TORP) were reflected by the (TORP) theoretical orientation (phonics, skills, and whole language) and their responses were consistent within their group designations. Moreover, she conducted a pilot study that showed a reliability of (Alpha, $r = .80$); also the factor analysis has been conducted and produced one factor that accounted for 64.1 % of the variation with a value of 23.03. Also, the results of the sampling of teachers’ responses indicated that the whole items of (TORP) can be divided into three main categories:

Phonics orientation which is represented by the following ten items: 1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10, 12, 20, 21, and 22.

Skills orientation which is represented by the following ten items: 4, 8, 11, 13, 14, 16, 19, 24, 25, and 28.

Whole language orientation that is represented by the following eight items: 5, 7, 15, 17, 18, 23, 26, and 27 (DeFord, 1985).

4. RESULTS

This study aimed at reviewing and answering the research questions and research hypotheses. This was launched by presenting the results of statistical analyses that were conducted in this study. Based on data analyses and the statistical results obtained by using univariate analysis of variance (Two-Way ANOVA), the findings of this study can be stated as follows:

Descriptive statistics were used to categorize Jordanian English elementary teachers’ theoretical orientations to reading instruction (phonics, skills, and

whole language). The results of data analysis revealed that there were (71) teachers (31%) who were categorized as belonging to phonics orientation as their instructional approach to reading instruction. With regard to the skills orientation, the results of category data revealed that there were 130 teachers (56.8%) who believed in skills orientation which achieved the highest number of the three categories. Finally, there were only 28 teachers (12.2%) who were categorized as holding beliefs about whole language orientation to reading instruction as shown in Table (1).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics.

Theoretical Orientations	Phonics	Skills	Whole Language
Number of teachers	71	130	28
Percentage	31%	56.8%	12.2%

Univariate analysis of variance (Two-Way ANOVA) was used to determine whether Jordanian English elementary teachers' beliefs about reading instruction vary with regard to their educational level (2-Year College degree, and 4-Year Bachelor degree). The researcher tested the first null hypothesis that stated there are no significant differences among Jordanian elementary English teachers' beliefs about reading instruction with regard to their educational level. Based on data analysis, the overall result indicated that there was a significant difference between Jordanian English elementary teachers' beliefs about reading instruction with respect to their educational level. The univariate results for the differences between educational level on the dependent variable (teachers' beliefs) showed a significant difference on their instructional beliefs in favor of those who hold a bachelor degree.

Univariate analysis of variance (Two-Way ANOVA) was used to determine whether Jordanian English elementary teachers' beliefs about reading instruction vary with regard to their gender (male and female). The researcher tested the null hypothesis that stated there are no significant differences between Jordanian elementary English teachers' beliefs about reading instruction with regard to their gender. Based on data analysis, the overall result indicated that there was a significant difference between Jordanian English elementary teachers' beliefs about reading instruction with respect to their gender. The univariate results for the differences between gender variable on the dependent variable (teachers' beliefs)

showed a significant difference on their instructional beliefs in favor of female.

Univariate analysis of variance (Two-Way ANOVA) was used to determine whether Jordanian English elementary teachers' educational level and gender affected their beliefs about reading instruction. The researcher tested the null hypothesis that stated there is no significant interaction among Jordanian elementary English teachers' educational level and gender that affected their beliefs about reading instruction. The overall result for the univariate analysis of variance (Two-Way ANOVA) procedure indicates that there was significant interaction between Jordanian English elementary teachers' educational level and gender that affected their beliefs about reading instruction.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was conducted to clarify and categorize English Elementary teachers' beliefs and their theoretical orientations to reading instruction in the public schools of Jordan. Teachers' theoretical orientations were categorized as belonging to either, a phonics, skills hierarchy, or whole language orientation. Another purpose of the investigation was to determine whether gender and educational level had any relationship to the beliefs held by Jordanian elementary teachers.

The sample of this study included 229 English elementary teachers in the public schools of Jordan drawn randomly from the population under examination according to the following variables: educational level (Bachelor degree and a two-year college degree) and gender (male and female). All 229 teachers responded to the survey instrument (Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile TORP). This instrument (TORP) consisted of twenty-eight items rating on a five point Likert-type scale; SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; U = uncertain; A = agree; and SA = strongly agree. The findings of this study were obtained by using two-way univariate analysis of variance (two-way ANOVA) and descriptive statistics. The data analysis was conducted by utilizing the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS).

According to the statistical results obtained by using descriptive statistics and a two-way univariate analysis of variance (two-way ANOVA), the following are the major conclusions that could be drawn from this study:

Teachers' Theoretical Orientation to Reading Instruction

This section discusses and provides conclusions from the results of this study as they pertain to the beliefs that were held by Jordanian English elementary teachers. Their beliefs were categorized to the three major orientations to reading instruction: skills, phonics and whole language approaches.

Skills Orientation to Reading Instruction

The most general finding of this study is that English elementary teachers in the public schools of Jordan regardless of their gender and educational level exhibited different conceptions and theoretical orientations to reading instruction. The results of this study showed that the majority of the teachers (n= 130 out of 229, 56.8%) surveyed in this study were found to hold a skills theoretical orientation to reading instruction. They believed that reading was a set of broad components consisting of decoding, vocabulary, grammar and comprehension; and that those reading tasks must be taught in isolation. Since the majority of the total sample had beliefs that fell within the skills hierarchy range, this implies that these teachers agreed with statements from the Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile TORP (DeFord, 1985) such as the following: fluency and expression are necessary components of reading that indicate good comprehension; the use of a glossary or dictionary is necessary in determining the meaning and pronunciation of new words; it is important for a word to be repeated a number of times after it has been introduced to insure that it will become a part of sight vocabulary; and young readers need to be introduced to the root form of the words before they are asked to read inflected forms. Hence, it could be inferred from the results of this study that the majority of the English elementary Jordanian teachers in public schools favored an orientation to reading instruction that:

breaks language down into components that are taught in isolation, not in a meaningful context is highly teacher directed, allowing students little choice in what is to be learned and how it is to be learned.

In addition, the results of this study are consistent with the majority of findings of the previous studies. The results are consistent with studies conducted by Bary et al. (1992), Bawden et al. (1979), Feng (1993), Mastrin-McAteer (1997), Hall and Napier (1994), and Levande (1989) that showed the majority of the teachers surveyed in their studies held skills theoretical orientation to

reading instruction and favored an orientation with whole words as the basis of instruction. The researcher's interpretation of this finding is due to the fact that teaching in Jordan is driven by a preconceived curriculum, instruction moves from part to whole, literacy related knowledge flows from teachers to the students. Therefore, the majority of the teachers' beliefs in this study could be manifested in a gradation of tasks with strong emphasis on word recognition and structural analysis and where teachers play an active role in the process of teaching.

Phonics Orientation to Reading Instruction

With regard to the phonics orientation to reading instruction, the results of this study revealed that 71 teachers of the sample (n=71, 31%) were categorized as holding beliefs that fell into the phonics approach because their total scores in the (TORP) ranged from 0 to 65 points. This finding implies that these Jordanian elementary teachers preferred phonics approach because they believed that phonics analysis is the most important form of analysis used when meeting new words; they also believed in a letter-sound emphasis in decoding during reading instruction. From their responses to the (TORP), it is apparent that they agreed with statements such as; a child needs to be able to verbalize the rules of phonics in order to assure proficiency in processing new words; dividing rules into syllables according to rules is a helpful instructional practice for reading new words; when children do not know a word, they should be instructed to sound out its parts. Hence, it could be stated that these teachers were phonics oriented because of their agreement to the statements in the (TORP) that reflected phonics orientation. Moreover, this finding that pertains to phonics approach is not consistent with both Feng and Etheridge's study (1993) that revealed only (12.4%) who held phonics orientation and is not in harmony with Mastrini-McAteer's study (1997) which indicated that (17%) of the teachers held phonics orientation that represented a lesser number of the respondents.

Based on the previously mentioned findings, it could be concluded that the majority of Jordanian teachers (87.8%) were categorized either phonics oriented or skills oriented. Hence, this implies that these teachers support bottom-up theories of reading process and they assume that students' behaviors are the result of present and past environment. Therefore, their model of reading seems to stem from the behaviorist thought which argues that

meaning lies in the text and that the reader must decode the author's written message into oral language in order to comprehend. In this perspective, decoding skill is the main process of reading in which the reader comes to understand the message of the text. This, in turn, implies that the philosophy of teaching English reading in the Jordanian public schools is based on traditional methods where the direct method is the center of classroom settings and activities.

Whole Language Orientation to Reading Instruction

With regard to whole language orientation to reading instruction, the results of this study indicated that only (n=28, 12.2%) of the sample teachers held a whole language orientation. They believed that all reading skills are interrelated, and that reading instruction should emphasize the integration of learning, speaking, reading and writing in a meaningful context. This finding supports and is somehow consistent with Mastrin-McAteer's study (1997) that revealed only (11%) of the respondents held whole language beliefs, and it is also consistent with Levande's study (1989) which showed that only (10%) of the sample held whole language orientation.

Based on this finding, it could be concluded that just few Jordanian teachers favored whole language approach in which the language (oral or written) is used for authentic purposes, including communication, information, and that children learn language best if it is learned for authentic purposes. In classroom, this involves: the use of authentic reading and writing tasks using whole text, not looking at parts of language (sound-symbol correspondences) for their own sake. In addition, these few teachers seem to agree with a type of instruction that occurs not when the teacher or curriculum specialist plans it, but in response to students' needs as they attempt to use language for communication. From this finding, it could be concluded that these teachers who favored a whole language approach do not support any type of centralized curriculum that is planned by the Ministry of Education in Jordan. Instead, they try to adopt the content of instruction to suit the needs and interests of students, and literacy-related knowledge flows reciprocally between them (teachers) and the students who demonstrate literate behavior in individualistic and communal situations. But most importantly, it could be concluded that these few teachers are "constructivists," because "constructivism" is the

philosophy and theory that underlies whole language approach. In this respect, it could be stated that these constructivist teachers encourage and accept students' autonomy; they allow students responses to drive lessons, shift instructional strategies and alter content; besides, when framing tasks, they use cognitive terminology such as classify, analyze, predict and create; they also inquire about students' understandings of concepts before sharing their own understandings of those concepts; and finally these constructivist teachers encourage students to engage in dialogue, both with the teacher and with one another.

Moreover, these teachers seem to agree with Lamb and Best (1990) and Rupp (1986) when they emphasized that both whole language and English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction are based on the same principles that are oriented to natural situations, meaning-based and emphasize students' prior knowledge and experiences. In this sense, the researcher is in full agreement with this stance because students will be able to construct meaning through the integration of existing and new knowledge, and the flexible use of strategies to foster, monitor, regulate, and maintain comprehension which is the ultimate goal of reading.

Conclusions from Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Results of the univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that there were significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between Jordanian English elementary teachers' beliefs and their gender. The univariate results for the differences between gender on the dependent variable (teacher's beliefs) showed a significant difference on their instructional beliefs in favor of females. The researcher interprets this finding by stating that female teachers in Jordan are more motivated, more controlled, and work harder than males, especially at the university level. This is due to the fact that female teachers are concerned about the cultural and the social life in Jordan which assumes that girls should be more controlled and responsive than boys. Another interpretation that might be taken into account is that females always try to compete and prove that they can work harder than males.

Finally, the results for the univariate analysis of variance indicated that there were significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between Jordanian English elementary teachers' beliefs and their educational level (4-year Bachelor degree and 2 year college degree). The univariate results

for the differences between educational level on the dependent variable showed a significant difference on their instructional beliefs in favor of those who held a 4-year Bachelor degree. Results indicate that teachers who held a 4 year Bachelor degree as a result of having two more additional years of studying at the university level than those who held a 2 year college degree, were exposed to more courses that enriched their knowledge and insights about reading instruction and how to teach reading because there are at least two practical courses at the university level where the students teach at the schools and at the same time they are supervised by their professors from their universities. Unfortunately, this practical experience is not offered for those who are enrolled in a 2-year college program. In addition, in the community college, most of the teachers hold a Master's degree, whereas at the university level, they should hold a Ph.D. degree.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Studies

Based on the findings of this study, it could be stated that the majority of Jordanian teachers viewed reading as a facilitator and caretaker of memory; as a result, reading in Jordanian schools is taught through memorization and drill, with a focus on orthography and pronunciation. However, few teachers viewed reading as a fulfilling expressive and receptive function, with an emphasis on meaning and comprehension. In light of this, teachers have to be more effective in developing students' literacy if they understand how to structure interactions with their students in a responsive manner. In this sense, teachers and students can work collaboratively toward shared academic goals.

More importantly, creating instruction that is responsive to the demands of a variety of social contexts requires teachers to take a social constructive stance toward curriculum and learning; it also requires teachers to alter instructional patterns in schools. Meeting this challenge requires attention to its use of students' familiar literacy experiences rather than a set of prescribed, curricular goals as a point of departure for learning activities. Consequently, teachers and students shape the curriculum and their reading programs at the intersection of the students' funds of knowledge and the students' curricular goals.

In addition, some teachers may prefer phonics approach and in their own reading may indeed find the use of other approaches more effective. Others may be

convinced that whole language approach is the most effective and may overemphasize its use by their pupils. Some teachers may dislike a particular approach to the point of omitting it completely from their reading instruction. Thus, it will be of great benefit for the teachers and consequently to the students to be aware of these three major approaches to reading instruction because once teachers have the concepts and techniques about these approaches, they can construct and use along with their students what really makes them proficient and functional readers by knowing when the use of a certain approach is more effective and appropriate than the other approaches.

Since this study is an attempt to examine teachers' theoretical orientations to reading instruction in public schools of Jordan, much more remains to be investigated in the quest to understand the relationship between teachers' beliefs about reading, their instructional practices and students' learning outcomes.

Further research is needed in the field of comparative methods of reading instruction to examine the effects of each of the three approaches to reading instruction. Therefore, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education in Jordan should conduct different research projects that focus on the impact of these reading approaches on students' performance. It is very essential to create functional readers who can think critically and be able to comprehend what they are reading.

Further research is needed in both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, especially interviews and observations in classroom settings so that it would be possible to gain a better understanding about teachers' theoretical orientations and classroom practices. This, in fact, requires time, effort and financial support; therefore, the researcher believes that educational institutions with the Ministry of Education can encourage and support such research projects.

Jordanian teachers conduct their reading instruction under the umbrella of the centralized curriculum that is planned and prepared by the Ministry of Education. Thus, it is recommended that autonomy and flexibility should be given to the teachers so that they can pick and choose what to teach and how to teach along with their students. In this regard, the researcher does not agree with any type of strict reading program; instead, each teacher should have the right to build his/her own reading program and teach in a way that would be consistent with students' abilities and potentials. It is so because the researcher

agrees with the fact that children are different and they learn differently; consequently, preparing explicit and diverse reading programs that would fit students' learning styles is an essential requirement for our learners.

Since the findings of this study showed that female teachers scored higher than male teachers, additional research should be conducted to investigate the reasons behind that; and at the same time, it is recommended that both female and male teachers hold seminars and conferences where they can exchange their ideas and concepts about reading instruction.

The findings of this study revealed that teachers who held a 4-year bachelor degree scored higher than those who held a 2-year college degree; consequently, additional research is needed to examine the reasons behind such results and at the same time it is recommended that some courses in the area of reading instruction should be offered in these community colleges, and they should have practical training programs that would help them in getting insights about the three major approaches to reading instruction.

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