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EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practices Regarding Reading Instruction in a Multi-Cultural Environment

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Abstract

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Different factors affect reading acquisition in EFL; mainly teachers' perspectives and practices, since teacher are the most significant and valuable resource in the school system. This article depicts the procedures used by teachers while promoting reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment and relates to teachers' perspectives concerning the effect of various factors, specifically cultural, on EFL reading instruction. The article presents partial findings of a mixed methods research in a doctoral thesis that addressed teachers' perceptions and practices regarding reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment. The study was conducted in Jewish and Arab schools in Israel. The research revealed that different procedures are used by teachers while promoting reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups in a multi-cultural learning environment these are mainly related to teachers' attention to different cultural aspects of language and are related to the emotional aspect. In terms of teachers' perspectives concerning the effect of specifically cultural factors on EFL reading instruction, the study showed that EFL reading instruction is influenced mainly by teachers' knowledge of their learners' background and their knowledge of pupils' L1.

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Keywords: EFL; reading acquisition; reading instruction; small groups; multicultural learning environment; EFL teachers' perceptions.

1. Introduction

Teachers are considered a valuable resource in any educational system and are dominant figures who influence students' learning. The complexity of teaching entails high teacher performance, certainly when striving to equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to face the challenges of

the 21st century in a changing world of globalization. These observations imply that students' achievements greatly depend on teachers' knowledge, preparation, and professional development. Clearly, EFL teachers in Israel and around the world are expected to provide differential instruction for students with diverse learning needs including different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Research conducted among Israeli EFL teachers that addressed teachers' perceptions and practices regarding reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment (Nachmani, 2015) revealed ambivalence regarding the significance of culture in an EFL reading context. This article presents partial findings of this research. It deals with the procedures used by teachers while promoting reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment and relates to teachers' perspectives concerning the effect of various factors, specifically cultural, on EFL reading instruction. Ultimately, raising EFL teachers' awareness of the significant role culture plays in EFL reading acquisition and providing them with the relevant knowledge and tools will result in providing EFL students with differential culturally sensitive reading instruction. This implies providing EFL students with prevention rather than intervention; making changes not only in the way teachers promote emergent readers' reading abilities in a small group framework, but also in the way they provide reading instruction in a classroom framework.

2. EFL Teaching in Israel

Israel, as a country of immigration, has absorbed a large immigrant population from multiple and diverse origins. In fact, Israel may be considered as an example of a natural laboratory of multilingualism (Leikin, Schwartz, & Tobi, 2012). It is a multilingual country with two official languages, Hebrew and Arabic (the language of the largest ethnic minority in Israel), English as a semi-official language that is widely used in various contexts, and native immigrant languages such as Russian, Amharic, Spanish, French, Romanian, German, and many others (Aronin & Spolsky, 2010; Leikin et al., 2012; Lewis, Gary, & Charles, 2015). This unique language situation represents one of the more complex cases of a multilingual and multi-cultural society (Leikin et al., 2012).

While many other languages are learned and spoken in Israel, English is solidly rooted as the "first foreign language". It is unofficially used as an official language, is generally accepted as everyone's second language, and is crucial to academic advancement (Aronin & Spolsky, 2010). It is the language that, after Hebrew and Arabic, is considered the most valuable asset of a plurilingual Israeli citizen. Hence, English is the foreign language for which there is the strongest local demand. Therefore, Israeli schools aim for the highest achievable standards of excellence in teaching English as a foreign language (Israel Ministry of Education, 2001). The goal is to produce speakers of Hebrew, Arabic, or other languages, who can make good use of the English language in an appropriate and comfortable manner. In fact, the curriculum is standards-based and as such it emphasizes what students will be able to do with the language (Aronin & Spolsky, 2010).

Furthermore, the English curriculum in Israel sets out expected standards for teaching English in Israel, in **all schools that are under the supervision of the Ministry of Education**, including all sectors: secular, religious, Jewish, Arab, Druze, and Bedouin. The Israeli English curriculum divides

language learning and teaching into four domains: social interaction, access to information, presentation, and appreciation of literature, culture, and language. The latter aims at fostering understanding and developing sensitivity towards people of various cultural backgrounds and raising learners' awareness of the nature of language, how languages are structured, and the differences between languages. In terms of appreciation of culture, students are expected to be aware that their culture is different from other cultures, to become acquainted with norms and behaviours in a variety of cultures, and ultimately to develop critical perspectives towards different cultural values and norms. In terms of appreciation of language, students are expected to acknowledge that languages are different, to be aware of how English is different from their mother tongue, and to gain insight into the complexities of language (Israel Ministry of Education, 2015). In accordance with the set standards, the Ministry of Education has published guidelines for EFL course book publishers who are required to design their course books by meeting these guidelines and receiving the ministry's approval before publishing. These course books are chosen by teachers and used in all schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education in Israel—both Jewish and Arab—and therefore contain instructions and glossaries in Hebrew and Arabic.

3. Difficulties in Acquiring EFL Reading among Hebrew and Arabic Speakers

There is consensus among researchers that acquiring good reading abilities is significant—not to say critical—for success in the 21st century. Not only is reading the skill that matters most to succeed in school, but children whose reading falls behind face great academic danger. Literacy is crucial since it can affect levels of income and opportunities. Hence, in our modern world, reading is obviously an essential skill. In Israel, as well as in other countries, it is not enough to be literate in one's native tongue. Since English is an international language, there is a strong need to be literate in this language. It is a given that some children experience difficulties while learning to read, for different reasons. Obviously, not all children acquire reading in their mother tongue and certainly not all learners whether they are Hebrew or Arabic readers (or any other language) acquire reading in EFL. Essentially, Hebrew and Arabic readers (readers of a completely different orthographic system) face different challenges in breaking the reading code in English.

Unquestionably, many processes are involved in the reading process, yet research has demonstrated that significant disruption of three processes—phonological, syntactic, and working memory—is typical of children who are poor readers in English and is actually the basis of reading disability. In fact, substantial correspondences were found among phonological abilities, syntactic awareness, and working memory within and across languages regardless of different orthographies. Even more so, the significant determinants of reading skills are individual differences, rather than language-dependent variables (Abu-Rabia & Siegel, 2003). Naturally, Hebrew and Arabic readers face difficulties while acquiring EFL reading. Some of these difficulties are common to both types of readers and some are specifically related to each type.

Kahn-Horwitz, Rofman, & Teitelbaum (1998) discuss four specific **difficulties that may be encountered by Hebrew learners of English** as a foreign language. The first difficulty is the nature of

the Hebrew alphabet in relation to English. This includes right-to-left directionality as well as its graphic representation, which is different from the Latin alphabet. It also includes the use of diacritical marks above or under letters as opposed to vowels placed after consonants. Another feature is capital letters, which exist in English but not in Hebrew. The second difficulty is phonological; i.e.; sounds that exist in English but do not exist in Hebrew. The third difficulty is orthography and the fact that in English, as opposed to Hebrew, there is no consistent one-to-one letter sound correspondence. The fourth difficulty is morphology; Hebrew is decoded from the root outwards as opposed to English, which is decoded linearly.

It has been established that to acquire reading and spelling in Hebrew as well as in English, morphological and phonological skills need to be acquired. The difficulties in acquiring English reading among young Hebrew speaking readers can be linked to the challenges these readers face when acquiring English reading having to do with the irregular orthographic system and the differences in the Hebrew and English word morphology. However, despite these differences there is evidence to show that basic fundamental reading related processes such as phonological, orthographic, and morphologic influence first language as well as foreign language reading acquisition. These were also proven to strongly serve as predictors of EFL word attack and text comprehension, and indirect predictors of EFL word recognition (Kahn-Horwitz, Shimron, & Sparks, 2005). Even more so, there is a correlation between Hebrew (L1) word reading and EFL reading achievement. Apparently, the EFL beginning reader who has no difficulties in internalizing the English alphabetic principle is the reader who has fluent Hebrew word reading skills and good vocabulary knowledge in Hebrew. That being so it is imperative to ascertain which students have difficulty with Hebrew word recognition and vocabulary knowledge from the very early stages of foreign language reading acquisition. These students might be at risk for EFL reading as well and as such they should be detected early and given intervention to prevent them from falling behind their peers (Kahn-Horwitz, Shimron, & Sparks, 2006).

Arabic readers, on the other hand, **face a complex linguistic situation**. In the first place, there is a difference between spoken Arabic and standard Arabic. Spoken Arabic is acquired as a mother tongue while Standard Arabic is acquired through formal reading instruction (Saiegh-Haddad, 2012). This diglossia hinders children's acquisition of literacy in Arabic (Leikin et al., 2012). Under these circumstances the natural acquisition of basic reading processes in Arabic is affected. This may result in poor language skills in the written form, which in turn influences other literacy-related practices and outcomes. Actually, the poor language skills in the written form and the high rates of illiteracy combined with low socio-educational background result in a reality where Arabic-speaking children have less chance of success since they begin the process of literacy acquisition with little or no knowledge of basic prerequisite language and literacy skills that are the basis of reading development (Saiegh-Haddad, 2012). In fact, these circumstances can also hinder native Arabic speaking beginner readers' acquisition of basic academic skills (Zohar & Raphiq, 2012). In addition, unlike English orthography, a sentence context effect is the key variable in reading Arabic orthography by both poor and skilled readers (Abu-Rabia, 2001). Moreover, it has been proven that bilingual/trilingual Arabic readers with reading problems in their L1 are likely to experience similar problems in acquiring Hebrew (L2) and English (L3). In fact, less skilled readers have deficits in working memory and

syntactic awareness and this can be reflected in all three languages. Interestingly enough, it has been recognized that the differences in language proficiency among L1, L2, and L3—in this case Arabic, Hebrew, and English—in reading and spelling are related to exposure and motivation to learn each specific language and not just to the different orthographies and the unique characteristics of each language (Abu-Rabia & Siegel, 2003).

4. Multicultural Language Education and EFL Reading Instruction in Israel

As previously mentioned, one of the domains in **the Israeli English curriculum** is appreciation of literature, culture, and language. The curriculum describes specific criteria for pupil performance in this domain to meet the ministry's standard. These criteria include familiarity with different cultural products and practices, being able to compare different cultural practices, behaviours, and traditions with their own, awareness of how cultural practices are reflected in various literary and cultural products, identifying identical words in English and their mother tongue, knowing how word order, sound, and writing systems in English are organized and how these elements compare with their mother tongue, being aware of differences in cultural conventions in English and their mother tongue such as in greetings, and awareness that languages differ in syntax (Israel Ministry of Education, 2015).

Inevitably, there is diversity among students in any given classroom. This is true regarding Israeli classrooms in particular given the unique language situation as described previously. The population of Israeli classrooms includes pupils who are native speakers of English, those who have grown up in a bilingual home or have lived or studied in an English-speaking environment, and pupils who are native speakers of Arabic whose school language learning load includes Modern Standard Arabic as well as Hebrew and English. Interestingly enough, due to the situation of Arabic diglossia, in Arabic-speaking schools, teaching English actually implies teaching a fourth language (Aronin & Spolsky, 2010). Some pupils are new immigrants and need to learn Hebrew as a second language as well as English as a foreign language. Some pupils, as a result of socio-economic circumstances, are inadequately prepared for schooling, while other pupils have special needs such as hearing and vision problems, dyslexia, attention disorders, and emotional and cognitive impairments (Israel Ministry of Education, 2001). Evidently, there is growth in bilingual and trilingual learners due to increasing numbers of speakers of Russian, Arabic, Amharic, and other South Americans or Europeans who study English as a third language. One can assume that these learners from different language backgrounds have their particular problems and challenges regarding the English language.

It is now widely agreed that literacy varies from culture to culture and members of different cultures are engaged in different kinds of reading having different purposes (Eskey, 2005). In fact, "What it means to be literate, how this literacy is valued, used and displayed will vary from culture to culture. Some cultures have enormous respect for the printed word, such that it is implicitly accepted as authority and cannot be questioned. Others fear the implications of putting any opinions in print, since the greater permanence accorded to opinions thereby makes the owner of the opinion more 'accountable'" (Alderson, 2000, p. 25).

Research has shown that in the complex and interactive processes of reading, both low-level cues and high-level schemata play an important part. Assumingly, these interactive processes are similar in second language reading and therefore second language readers can benefit from their reading ability in their first language (Parry, 1996). Evidently, schemata play a significant role in the reading process since comprehending a text requires more than linguistic knowledge and involves interaction between a reader's background knowledge and the text itself. Research establishes that children have better reading comprehension and competence with texts that are culturally familiar (Drucker, 2003). Moreover, when children are required to interpret occurrences and ideas from a perspective that is different from the one with which they are familiar they find it difficult (Rosowsky, 2000). Furthermore, schematic knowledge has great significance in the field of reading in a foreign language since activating learners' existing schematic knowledge at a pre-reading stage is essential to aiding reading comprehension (Hedge, 2000). In fact, reading comprehension performance is strongly related to cultural bias. Hence teachers' awareness of cultural schemata is essential to avoid confusing poor reading comprehension with cultural confusion. This is even more critical when assessing reading (Rosowsky, 2000).

Interestingly, reading strategies are partly perceived as a function of culture, and differences in these strategies are often related to how different cultural communities represent, use, and teach both language and literacy (Parry, 1996). Given that, culturally relevant teaching is a significant component of literacy instruction in culturally diverse classrooms. It is the kind of teaching that is designed to use students' cultures as the basis for helping them understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge, viewing students' second language as an additive to the classroom environment, rather than as a deficit (Drucker, 2003).

Culturally sensitive literacy instruction includes skills that are required for acquiring the ability to read together with frequent opportunities to practice reading using a variety of rich materials in meaningful contexts. This literacy instruction includes accommodation (having a better understanding of communicative styles and literacy practices of students and planning their instruction accordingly), incorporation (understanding the way in which each student defines values and uses literacy as part of cultural practices and potentially making adjustments to meet the needs of students), and adaptation (expectation that children learn to measure up to the norms of those who control the schools, institutions, and workplace) (Edwards & Klinger, 2006).

Naturally, some learners encounter difficulties when learning to read; in such cases intervention is essential. For intervention to be successful, children's cultural and linguistic identity should be recognized and related to. Teachers need to recognize how culture influences teaching, learning, and development (McNaughton, 2006). Familiarity with students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and understanding the conditions within which learners' reading development takes place will not only provide learners with the ideal context for instruction, as mentioned earlier, but also help teachers become familiar with how they influence students' motivation and reading development and in turn allow teachers to implement a more culturally sensitive approach (Orosco & O'Connor, 2014).

Finally, teachers are required to address English language learners' language and literacy development and cultural needs through systematic and planned instruction. Hence teachers need to be

able to recognize students' diversity and to be able to make conscious and informed instructional decisions based on learners' needs (Coday, Harper, & De Jong, 2015).

5. Methodology

This mixed method research was conducted in three phases, with each phase designed on the basis of information collected inductively in the previous one (Creswell, 2009). First, well-known experts in the field of teaching reading as EFL in Israel were interviewed to find out what they believed to be the effective ways to promote emergent readers in small groups. Then EFL teachers were observed to gain impressions and form questions for the next research tool to ascertain how they integrate and promote emergent readers in small groups. Then those teachers were interviewed. Based on the data collected through these observations and interviews with teachers and specialists, a questionnaire was designed to be able to reach some generalizations with regard to teachers' perceptions regarding cultural factors affecting reading acquisition in EFL. The questionnaires were analysed statistically. This article presents some of the findings emerging from the qualitative and the quantitative phase of the research focusing on the procedures used by teachers while promoting reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment as well as teachers' perspectives concerning the effect of various factors, specifically cultural, on EFL reading instruction. The study was conducted in Jewish and Arab schools in the northern area of Israel in 2014. The research population included four well known experts in the field of teaching reading to EFL students in Israel and 60 English teachers (Jewish and Arab) in the north of Israel who use small group hours for promoting emergent readers and developing their reading abilities in their second year of EFL studies (15 teachers were interviewed and observed, and 45 other teachers were delivered a questionnaire).

6. Results

The current research examined teachers' practices regarding the promotion of reading abilities in culturally diverse groups. Based on evidence gathered from observations of English teachers teaching EFL emergent readers in a small group framework, themes and categories emerged that represent teachers' practices. These categories emerged: teaching reading methods and strategies, small group instruction intervention, focus of the lesson, and cultural educational orientation. In this article, I will relate to the latter, cultural educational orientation, which is the focus of this research (Table 1).

Table 1. Cultural educational orientation

Sub-Category	Evidence
☒ Specific problems which could be characteristic for Hebrew or Arabic speakers	Directionality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ writing letters in the air ✓ "writing" words using sticks, dice, cards
	Sound system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ sounds in the target language that do not exist in L1; referring to L1 sounds to help learners compare and contrast the sounds in the different languages ✓ using cognates to help learners remember letter sounds ✓ using L1 transcript ✓ using students' schemata when practicing segmenting words through names (cultural surrounding – names that are typical for the population of school) ✓ using chants and funny letter stories consisting of L1 words, typical gestures, and body movements as mnemonic devices
	Culture of learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ relating to the typical culture of learning in Israeli schools: promoting independent learners who are responsible for their studies together with involved parents
☒ The emotional aspect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ nurturing students' confidence & feelings of success ✓ providing a tool for calming themselves down in a respectful manner using 'quite stones' ✓ giving them an advantage and providing a good feeling

This research also examined teachers' perspectives concerning the effect of cultural factors on EFL reading instruction (Table 2). Research findings revealed that the factors with the highest effect on EFL reading instruction were "Teachers' knowledge of their learners' background" (4.24) and "Teachers' knowledge of pupils' L1" (4.11) while "The difference vs. similarity of students' and teachers' cultural background" was found to have the lowest effect on EFL reading instruction (3.60).

Table 2: The effect of various factors on EFL reading instruction

To what extent do you think each one of the following factors can affect EFL reading instruction?	To a low extent	To a medium extent	To a high extent	Total	Total	Mean	Std. Deviation
Students' culture of learning	6.67%	31.11%	62.22%	100.00%	N=45	3.78	.95
The difference vs. similarity of student's and teacher's cultural background	15.56%	24.44%	60.00%	100.00%	N=45	3.60	1.07
Materials chosen	8.89%	22.22%	68.89%	100.00%	N=45	3.80	.94
Teachers' sensitivity to cultural differences	11.11%	24.44%	64.44%	100.00%	N=45	3.73	1.05
Teachers' knowledge of their learners' background	4.44%	13.33%	82.22%	100.00%	N=45	4.24	.86
Teachers' knowledge of pupils' L1	6.67%	13.33%	80.00%	100.00%	N=45	4.11	.96
The effect of various factors on EFL reading instruction - calculated index					N=45	3.88	.67

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This research revealed that different procedures are used by teachers while promoting reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups in a multi-cultural learning environment. The first procedure includes teachers' attention to different cultural aspects of language, mostly highlighting specific problems that are typical of Hebrew or Arabic speakers incorporating specific L1 cultural elements. This finding can be explained by the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education encouraging teachers to compare the target language, English, with students' home language. The ministry uses the term 'home language', which is interpreted by most teachers as referring to Hebrew or Arabic; even though, as previously mentioned in this article, for some of the students Hebrew or Arabic are second languages and not necessarily the language spoken at home.

This finding is supported by the literature, which discusses the differences between the English language as opposed to Hebrew and Arabic reflected in the orthography and morphology of these languages (Abu-Rabia & Siegel, 2003; Kahn-Horwitz et al., 1998) as well as the complex situation of diglossia that Arabic speakers face, which can influence their language and literacy skills that are the basis of reading development (Saiegh-Haddad, 2012; Leikin et al., 2012).

The conclusion emerging from this is that promoting EFL emergent readers learning to read in small groups within a multi-cultural environment is strongly related to teachers' awareness of different cultural aspects of language, namely the differences between languages and how they can impair EFL reading acquisition and the integration of these aspects in reading instruction.

The second procedure used by teachers while promoting reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment is related to the emotional aspect. The evidence gathered from this research revealed that the emotional aspect is significant in reading instruction of EFL emergent readers learning in small groups. The explanation for this finding resides with teachers' educational philosophy, which perceives the emotional aspect as a crucial factor in general and among emergent readers in particular. This lies in the fact that emergent readers are learners who have already experienced failure and thus need to re-build their self-confidence, self-esteem, and sense of success.

This finding supports the literature, which stresses the importance of reading intervention as early as possible since intervention might not work for psychological reasons after experiencing several years of failure (Hand Moats, 1999). In addition, since these readers have already experienced reading problems, they avoid reading and as such should be motivated to read by experiencing success (Minskoff, 2005), thereby developing intrinsic motivation for reading (Grabe, 2004). Evidently, small group instruction enables success and can actually change children's lives (Diller, 2007).

The conclusion is that promoting EFL emergent readers learning to read in small groups within a multi-cultural environment requires developing EFL emergent readers' self-confidence and self-esteem and increases their motivation to read.

In terms of teachers' perspectives concerning the effect of specifically cultural factors on EFL reading instruction, the study showed that EFL reading instruction is influenced mainly by teachers' knowledge of their learners' background and their knowledge of pupils' L1. This finding can be explained by the way different norms, expectations, and values of learning and specifically EFL

learning shared by different cultures affect EFL reading acquisition and how specific features of different languages can assist or hinder the acquisition of EFL reading.

This finding is supported by the literature, which relates to schematic knowledge as a culturally related feature that influences language learning in general and particularly reading acquisition in a foreign language (Hedge, 2000).

The conclusion is that promoting EFL emergent readers learning to read in small groups within a multi-cultural environment depends greatly on teachers' knowledge of their learners' background and L1.

In summary, the evidence presented in this article displayed that two main procedures targeted at promoting EFL emergent readers' reading abilities are used by teachers teaching reading in small groups within a multi-cultural environment. The first is integration of different cultural aspects of the language, mainly relating to the differences between the languages in their reading instruction, and the second is developing EFL emergent readers' self-confidence and self-esteem with the aim of increasing their motivation. In addition, the evidence presented in this research indicated that different cultural factors affect reading acquisition in EFL. In this article I related to one of the most significant teacher-related factors; specifically, to teachers' knowledge of the learners' background and L1, which is perceived to be significant in the context of reading instruction.

In conclusion, teachers are the most valuable and influential resource in the school system, and their role in reading instruction is critical. Hence, teachers' use of cultural sensitivity in their practices using sophisticated teaching methods and strengthening students' affective aspects fostering their self-confidence and self-esteem will ultimately result in promoting EFL reading acquisition in a multi-cultural learning environment. Raising EFL teachers' awareness of the significance of cultural factors in EFL reading acquisition context will provide EFL students with differential culturally sensitive reading instruction. Therefore, EFL teachers' cultural competence needs to be developed by raising their awareness of cultural diversity and its effect on reading acquisition and encouraging teachers to provide effective differential reading instruction to all learners, taking their cultural backgrounds into consideration to promote emergent readers' reading ability.

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