

English Spelling and Saudi EFL learners: An evaluation of teachers' perceptions and knowledge

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Abstract

The present study examines the reasons why the Saudi EFL students' spelling performance is notoriously below standard. The Saudi EFL scene has a vast corpus of research examining it from different angles but most of it has focused on the linguistic differences between Arabic and English, whereas this study attempts to evaluate the perceptions and educational background of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia as a possible factor at play. Two hundred and four Saudi teachers participated in this empirical study, answering questions based on three main research topics: the perceptions of EFL professors towards teaching phonics; how the teaching experience influences their attitude when it comes to phonics; and what the knowledge level of teachers regarding phonics actually is. The results indicate that Saudi EFL teachers generally have a positive attitude towards teaching English phonics and can see the vital importance of teaching this skill to their students. On the other hand, the teaching experience in question does have some influence on their perspective with respect to the relevance of phonic rules teaching—as more experienced professors tend to develop a better stance towards phonics teaching. Unfortunately, this study, coinciding with prior research findings, also shows that English phonics knowledge levels of the participants are generally considerably low.

Keywords: EFL teachers; English phonics; fluency; knowledge; perceptions; spellings

1. Introduction

Phonology and orthography are used in both reading and spelling, making these two skills more connected than many teachers realize. Thus, phonics is a crucial step in improving a pupil's spelling ability, implying that if a learner can spell a word correctly, they can almost always read it too. Spelling for English Language Learners (ELLs) is an important transcriptive skills that has a role to play in developing the writing skills. When learners minds waver looking for right spelling, whether by seeking teacher's help or resorting to their own devices, the train of thoughts is broken, placing cognitive load on them. This has an adverse effect on organization and expression of ideas whereas fluent spelling aids fluent writing. Teachers in EFL classrooms, on the other hand, find themselves challenged by the question of just how much of spelling error is to worthy of being marked, differentiating and correcting spelling and usage errors, and finally, the place of spelling in assessment criteria. For non-native learners of a language there are many additional dimensions to the learning experience as they struggle with the orthography, the left-right, vertical-horizontal orientation, and the

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whole gamut of phonics to go with the letters and words. EFL learners, for instance, often have problems with fluent reading and English literacy, as these require specific skills regarding both new sounds and fast letter-by-letter processing tasks. Studies have shown that Arab learners of English as a Foreign Language particularly have low spelling skills (Al-Busaidi & Al-Saqqaf, 2015; Al-Sobhi et al., 2017). One of the principal causes of this phenomenon has been attributed to differences between the two languages. According to Al-Jarf (2010), the spelling difficulties in English for Saudi students are a result of the fact that in the Arabic language there is an unavoidable correspondence between phonemes and graphemes. Allaith and Joshi (2011) confirm that Arabic EFL learners confused with the phonemes which do not exist in Arabic due to unique its phonological system, resulting in both spelling and reading errors in English.

A study by Deacon (2015) confirms that Arabic speakers of English do struggle with structural spelling issues, by showing that they statistically make more errors than their Korean counterparts do. Moreover, Deacon further claims that even high-proficiency Arabic students are not significantly better than the low ones, proving that better writing skills and more exposure to the English language do not necessarily lead to better spelling results, for which the author suggests that orthographic skills might be harder to learn than any other writing ability. Furthermore, Fender (2008) compared Arabic and non-Arabic ESL students and showed that while there was not much difference in the listening comprehension area, Arab students finally achieved way lower results on both spelling and reading comprehension assignments. Indeed, the results in question indicated that, whereas more complexity was certainly problematic for both groups of learners, Arab students ended up having more difficulties with orthographic aspects, such as derivational spelling and basic syllable-spelling patterns.

1.1 Research Problem

Most studies to date have focused on differences between Arabic and English to explain the current problems in literacy and spelling within EFL evaluations, while little research has been done on the actual effectiveness of explicit spelling instructions and the role that EFL educators have— in terms of both their knowledge and stance toward spelling teaching (Albalawi, 2016; Aloglah, 2018; Altamimi & Rashid, 2019; Puliatte & Ehri, 2018). The present study, much like Puliatte and Ehri (2018), examines knowledge levels of English teachers, as well as their corresponding perceptions regarding spelling teaching, as they are definitely important factors conditioning EFL learners' success in spelling. Likewise, Kahn-Horwitz (2015) highlights that the problem of teaching spelling skills to EFL students may lie in the fact that educators are not adequately prepared to teach English spelling and word recognition, nor do they acknowledge the vital importance of teaching spelling abilities to their students. Aloglah (2018) also postulates that explicit spelling instruction to students is often very limited. Albalawi (2016) further espouses that poor pedagogical training programs and, consequently, deficient teachers' expertise are responsible, among other factors, for poor reading abilities of Saudi EFL students. A recent study by Altamimi and Rashid (2019), conducted on fifteen students from the English Language Department at the University of Tabuk and fifteen English teachers from the same office, parallelly, demonstrates that both the college syllabus and educational system are also perceived as responsible for students' spelling problems as much as the remarkable differences between Arabic and English. More precisely, participants affirmed that the curriculum totally ignores the importance of spelling rules and techniques.

1.2. Research Questions

The present study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Saudi EFL teachers regarding explicit spelling instruction?
2. How deep is the Saudi EFL teachers' knowledge of the English language sound system?

3. How does teachers' expertise/experience influence their own attitude towards teaching phonic skills to the learners?

2. Literature Review

2.1. EFL Teachers in Saudi Arabia

One possible reason for poor reading and spelling skills of EFL learners in Saudi Arabia can be traced not only to differences between the two languages in question but also to teachers' performance. Given these circumstances, it is hugely important to see how EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia are effectively trained. Al-Seghayer (2014) showed that departments of English in Saudi Arabia tend to focus on different aspects of the language according to the level of the respective studies: During the first two years, courses are mainly based on developing general language skills, like reading, writing, listening comprehension and speaking. In fact, both grammatical and vocabulary rules are also included in the curriculum within these first two years. The latter two, on the other hand, are more emphasized in advanced language features and methodology of English teaching. Finally, the last semester is reserved for practicum studies, when prospective teachers are given a class to lead in an intermediate or secondary school and are supervised by their corresponding mentors.

Further studies have highlighted possible problems with how English is being taught at college departments, which may end up having an impact on how these prospective teachers of English as a Second Language may teach their students. Alshuaifan (2009) carried out a qualitative research, and interviewed 96 language teachers in Saudi Arabia, which indicated that EFL preparation programs do not count on either cultural awareness courses or syllabus design; and they even lack some essential linguistics courses. Zohairy's (2012) study (2012), on the professional development of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia, showed that only two universities out of 11 within the sample, effectively offer training opportunities for EFL teachers. Ought to be mentioned, the study participants also raised concerns regarding the development programs they have access to.

These previous studies finally show that there is a critical lack of both training and continuous professional development for EFL professors in Saudi Arabia— particularly alarming is the lack of in-service training programs, especially as there are EFL teachers who had almost zero in-service teaching preparation while they have been working for several years in public schools. Evidently, novice educators seem to receive very little help, which negatively affects their development as future teachers (Alhamad, 2018). In addition, Alnefaie (2016) also showed that most Saudi EFL professors believe that they are marginalized in the decision-making process regarding the curriculum design and, as a result, this frustration may even affect their teaching abilities.

2.2. Teachers' knowledge and perceptions over English orthography and its respective teaching methods

Kahn-Horwitz (2015) describes the Israeli EFL students in a similar situation to Saudi Arabians— poor literacy achievement, due to teachers' insufficient knowledge of the language orthography, word recognition and spelling skills, regardless of their teaching experience. As a matter of fact, after having taken semester courses focused on these linguistic abilities, post-test marks were still far from expected, especially on the count of phonological awareness. Thereby, the author concludes that a more intensive course, which integrally combines English orthographic conventions with their corresponding teaching practices, would generate a remarkably positive effect towards EFL students' reading and writing capabilities. On the other hand, the study also shows that knowledge levels determine the way professors feel about if and how spelling should be taught, showing that their

learning background influences the perception of the importance of teaching both word recognition and spelling.

According to Kourieos (2014), literacy comprehension difficulties presented by EFL students in Cyprus can initially be explained by the lack of both subject-matter and pedagogical knowledge from EFL teachers who tend to drag these insufficiencies from teaching preparation programs which do not provide them with the adequate training. Indeed, the author interestingly carries out a study in which she interviews not only in-service elementary educators, but also student-teachers going through their respective courses within colleges' teaching education programs, with the major objective of detecting which these interviewees consider to be the most important factors for effective language teaching at primary level. Curiously, most participants did not tend to highlight educators' knowledge and skills as much as the content and organization of the corresponding lessons. To be exact, they reported the urgent development of a more child-friendly activities curriculum, which should include a larger portion of English learning time via games and computers utilization, given that both mechanisms encourage students better than storytelling or intercultural understanding. The author concludes that interviewees fail at explaining students' English learning accomplishments, which actually depend on educators' skills to catch pupils' attention and communicate with them in an effective pedagogical manner as much as their animosity to learn via either child-friendly or more traditional activities.

With respect to phonological awareness as a highly relevant factor for proper early literacy education, Mather et al., (2001) carried out a survey study to evaluate teachers' skills and monitor their perceptions according to their professional experience— including both pre-service and in-service educators. The authors' findings were quite intricate: in spite of the fact that teachers with three or more years of hands-on activity and pre-service professors agreed on the importance of invented spelling and the primary necessity of beginning readers to encounter a word numerous times to incorporate it to their sight vocabulary— as these methods represent the learning foundations for an appropriate development of phonological awareness— over 90% of the interviewees did actually not have the spoken and written language structure understanding required to teach these elements. In fact, during the data collection phase, several pre-service teachers themselves claimed to be very worried about their own lack of preparation considering terminology related to teaching in sound-symbol relationships.

It must be pointed out that Mahar et al., (2008) highlighted this top-priority urgency for sound-symbol relationships teaching within early literacy programs, to the detriment of a meaning-based approach primacy. More precisely, these authors looked into the Australian educational system by putting together a quantitative-research investigation and covering a total of 120 cases, which gathered not only pre-service and in-service educators but also Catholic, state and independent school professionals. Results showed that only a few independent school teachers obtained the sufficient metalinguistics knowledge to properly teach pupils with reading problems. The authors attribute this phenomenon to the traditional predominance of meaning-based approaches within the Australian educational system. Indeed, whereas independent school educators stated that their workplaces emphasized a phonics-based approach when developing reading instruction curriculums, state teachers reported that schools tended to give more focus to meaning-based literacy instruction. Taking into consideration their own perceptions, however, most of them— except for some of the catholic schoolteachers— tended to support phonological-based teaching during early literacy stages, instead of meaning-based instructional approaches.

Joshi et al., (2008) identified effective teaching as one of the major factors that could impact literacy acquisition. Furthermore, Moats (2009) highlighted that effective teaching is even more significant when we are dealing with children who are learning English as Secondary Language, or when students have severe language difficulties. To be exact, effective literacy teaching seems to be

dependent on knowledge of phonemic, graphemic, syllabic, morphemic, and semantic components (Piasta et al., 2009).

EFL teachers usually provide similar literacy instruction assignments to those who teach English as First Language, by developing specific programs according to the respective assessment of each student's literacy difficulties (Moats, 2009). According to Moats (1994), in order to be able to provide a fine evaluation for students and, consequently, give the best possible instructions, EFL teachers should exhaustively know English orthographic rules. Further research has shown that this type of knowledge is vastly missing among EFL teachers (Goldfus, 2012; Roffman, 2012). On the other hand, the importance of teachers' instructions themselves has been confirmed in a large-scale study, on over 50,000 classrooms, by Foorman and Petscher (2010), who proved that these instructions were much more important for spelling skills development than the overall quality of schools in question.

In a series of interviews conducted on EFL teachers, Roffman (2012) showed that many of them reported the feeling of unhappiness with their literacy teaching abilities, which has motivated them to start attending development programs on reading acquisition and difficulties, as well as English orthography. The experience of these educators showed that they had gained valuable knowledge throughout these programs and were totally able to apply in practice what they had learned, resulting in a radically more efficient way of dealing with students' literacy difficulties. The same paper shows that even teachers in high schools, who also took these courses, report that they had a better experience in teaching students who lacked reading skills from elementary school. According to the interviewed teachers, their very own beliefs about literacy acquisition, and insights on the ability of all students to accomplish literacy proficiency, changed after attending the development programs on this issue.

Vaisman and Kahn-Horwitz (2020), furthermore, show that EFL teachers unfortunately tend to dedicate most time to vocabulary and spend very little on phonemic awareness and reading. In opposition, those teachers who have themselves higher levels of knowledge of phonological, syllabic, and orthographic rules tend to spend more time teaching phonemic awareness, grapheme-phoneme correspondence and reading skills, respectively.

3. Methodology

The study is empirical in nature and its aim is to gauge EFL Saudi teachers' perceptions and knowledge of English spelling instruction. The participant base is wide as it includes both male and female teachers employed in Riyadh region, which has the lion's share in education sector in the country with as many as sixteen universities offering 250 study programs. The research team accessed the Ministry of Education database to contact English teachers, in Riyadh district— a total of 2,356 cases. It must be pointed out that the Ministry helped by sending an SMS message with a Google form link to the entire analysis population. Finally, 204 teachers completed the forms and took part in the sample for this study.

On the other hand, the measurement instrument was composed by two different patterns— a survey and a phonics knowledge assessment. For starters, the survey was specially designed to enquire about teachers' distinct perceptions and was adopted from The Teacher Perceptions about Early Reading and Spelling (TPERS), an instrument originally developed by DeFord (1985). DeFord put together several questions for the survey with the goal of differentiating among three theoretical orientations toward reading: phonics, skills and whole language. The current study only utilized the first part concerning phonics teaching, which consists of 6 questions. The Teacher Knowledge Assessment employed throughout this research is the Structure of Language (TKA: SL). Basically, it is composed of 22 multiple choice questions that examine knowledge of the English language according to both word and

sound levels— items were adapted from Mather et al., (2001). This questionnaire contained 17 items out of 22 after first reviewing and testing them on 9 cases.

4. Data Analysis and Results

Questionnaire items are analysed according to the five Likert Scales, as follow: *strongly agree (5)*, *agree (4)*, *neither agree nor disagree (3)*, *disagree (2)* or *strongly disagree (1)*. The results were calculated using SPSS 22th version. Both descriptive and inferential analyses was obtained in this study.

1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

Figure 1 shows that total of 204 teachers took part in the study: 104 (51.5%) females and 98 (48.5%) males.

Two participants opted not to state their gender. The percentage of participants' gender is presented in figure 1.

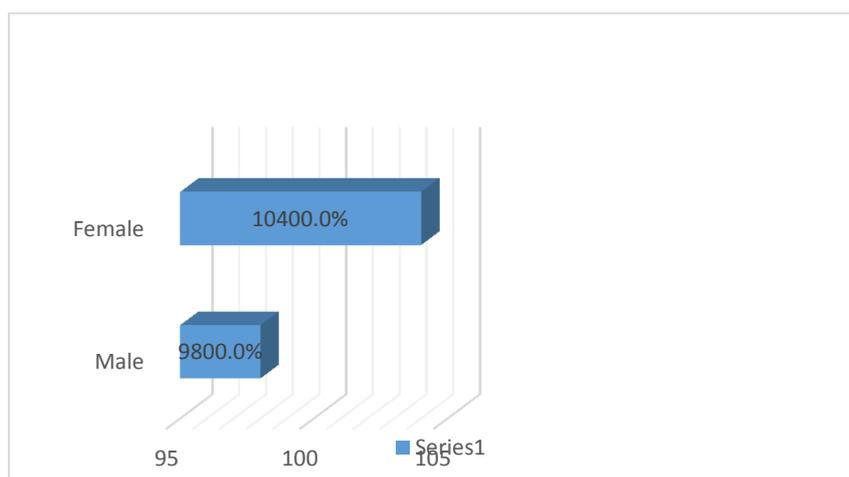


Figure 1. Demographic description

Moreover, 163 (79.9%) participants hold bachelor's degrees, 25 (12.2%) master's degrees and 1 (0.4%) a Ph.D. degree. Moreover, 14 (6.8%) participants stated college student status as the highest academic degree, whereas 1 (0.4 %) participant hold diploma in special education. These results are presented in Figure 2.

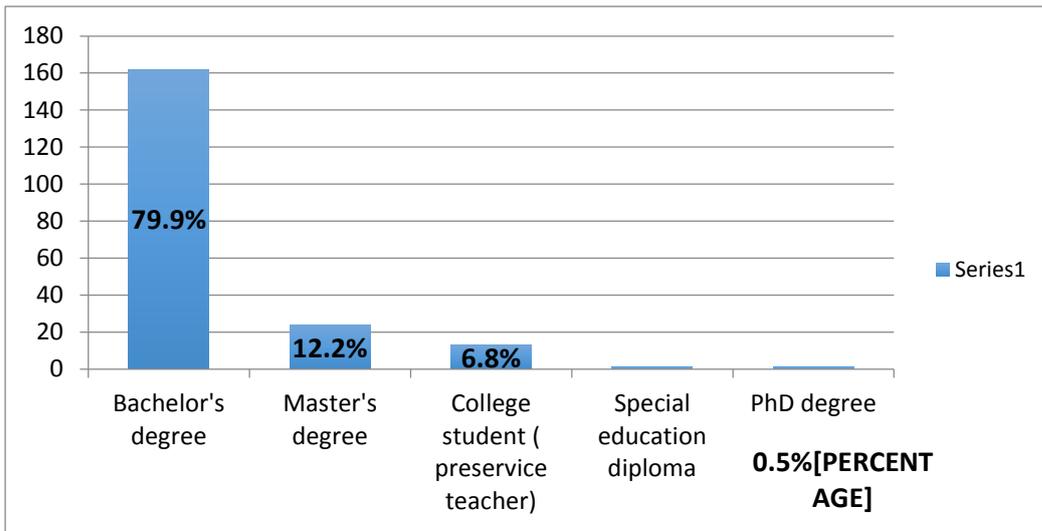


Figure 2. Educational Qualifications

Figure 3 shows the teaching experience of the participants expressed in years. 122 (59.8%) of them have been educators for 10-20 years. 60 (29.4%) participants have been teaching for 6-10 years. 18 (8.8%) participants reported experience between 1-5 years. In addition, 4 participants (1.9%) have been working as teachers.

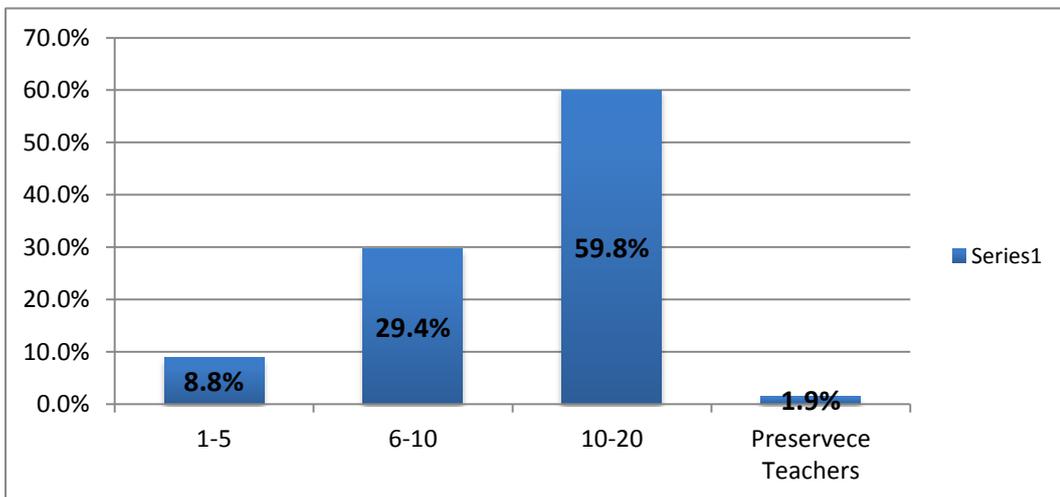


Figure 3. Years of experience

The study tried to answer three research questions. The first question checks the participants' attitudes regarding the explicit teaching of sounds system to the learners. RQ1: What are the perceptions of Saudi EFL teachers regarding explicit spelling instruction?

Teachers reported positive attitudes towards the explicit teaching of the sound systems. Table 1 shows that Saudi teachers scored a total means of 4.06 with a standard deviations of 0.95. Their means scores come between 3.9 and 4.3. All the mean scores for each items show high positive perceptions of teachers regarding the importance of teaching English sound systems.

Table 1. Results of descriptive statistics

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. <i>Phonic rules (representing each speech sound with a single symbol) should be taught to early language learners.</i>	204	3.9261	1.13864
2. <i>Phonics (learning the sounds of letters, letter groups, and syllables) instruction can help students improve their spelling abilities.</i>	204	4.3202	.86799
3. <i>English teachers should teach English phonics when introducing the English Alphabet.</i>	204	4.1478	1.03782
4. <i>Poor phonemic awareness (acknowledge of the individual sounds in words) inhibits learning accurate spelling</i>	204	3.7291	.90679
5. <i>Visual memory for the features of words (how it is written) is essential for accurate spelling.</i>	204	4.2414	.79345
6. <i>English spelling is a visual repetition. We spell a word correctly because we have seen it, at least, once before and we know what it looks like.</i>	204	4.0049	.98251
Total		4.06	0.95

The second research question aimed to find out the reportiour of EFL teachers to the wound systems.

RQ2: How deep is the Saudi EFL teachers' knowledge of the English language sound system?

The teachers were asked to answer seventeen multiple-choice questions designed to measure participants' knowledge. The results are presented in Table 2, which shows the percentage of cases that answered each question correctly.

According to Table 2, the depth of teachers' knowledge in pronunciation seems to be half mid. They have knowledge in short vowels, phonemes, they can count the numbers of phonemes in open syllables of familiar words and could not do so with multi syllable words. Teachers have problems in consonant clusters, schwa, diphthongs, and syllable structures.

Table 2. Teachers' knowledge in the sound systems

questions	Correct	incorrect
1. <i>Which word (from the listed words) contains a short vowel?</i>	86%	14%
2. <i>A phoneme refers to</i>	71.4%	29%
3. <i>A pronounceable group of letters containing a vowel sound is a:</i>	62.1%	38%
4. <i>If "tife" were a word, the letter 'I' would probably sound be like the 'I' in:</i>	59.1%	41%

5. A combination of two or three consonants pronounced so that each letter keeps its own identity is called:	35.5%	65%
6. A schwa sound is found in the word:	41.4%	59%
7. A diphthong is found in the word:	24.1%	76%
8. Two combined letters that represent one single speech sound are:	16.3%	84%
9. How many speech sounds are in the word 'eight'?	60.1%	40%
10. How many speech sounds are in the word 'box'?	17.2%	83%
11. How many speech sounds are in the word 'grass'?	42.4%	58%
12. How many speech sounds are in the word 'knee'?	88.7%	11%
13. How many speech sounds are in the word 'through'?	67.0%	33%
14. Count the number of syllables for the word 'unbelievable'	34.5%	66%
15. Count the number of syllables for the word 'pies'	53.2%	47%
16. If you say the word, and then reverse the order of the SOUNDS, the word 'ice' would be:	46.3%	54%
17. If you say the word, and then reverse the order of the SOUNDS, the word 'enough' would be:	37.4%	63%
Total	50%	50%

The third research question aim to check the correlation between teaching experience and attitudes.

RQ3: How does teachers' expertise/experience influence their own attitude towards teaching phonic skills to the learners?

In Table 3 teachers' experience was compared towards their attitudes toward explicit teaching of sound systems. With reference to the first items, the teachers with teaching experiences between (10-20 years) got higher attitudes toward teaching the sounds whereas the other two groups (1-5 & 6-10) scored moderate attitudes. More over the sig value scored 0.003 which means that teaching experience affects teachers' attitudes positively toward teaching the sound systems. In the second and third items, both groups of (6-10 & 10-20) scored got high positive attitudes while the less experience group (1-5) scored moderate. There is also a significant effect in the teachers' attitudes attributed to teaching experience. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth items, there are no significant influence of the teaching experience over teachers' attitudes. The Sig. values for these item are as follow (.043, .845 & .069), all are greater than .005.

Table 3. Teaching experience and attitudes

	Grou		Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig
	p	N				
<i>Phonic rules (representing each speech sound with a single symbol) should be taught to early language learners.</i>	1-5	18	3.4444	1.29352	6.004	.003
	6-10	60	3.6500	1.13234		
	10-20	122	4.1475	1.06540		
<i>Phonics instruction (learning the sounds of letters, letter groups, and syllables) can help students improve their spelling abilities.</i>	1-5	18	3.6111	1.19503	7.244	.001
	6-10	60	4.3500	.79883		
	10-20	122	4.4180	.80124		

<i>English teachers should teach phonics when introducing English Alphabet.</i>	1-5	18	3.3889	1.37793	7.240	.001
	6-10	60	4.0333	1.02456		
	10-20	122	4.3197	.93832		
<i>Poor phonemic awareness (recognition of the individual sounds in words) inhibits learning accurate spelling</i>	1-5	18	3.3889	1.03690	3.206	.043
	6-10	60	3.5833	.96184		
	10-20	122	3.8525	.84962		
<i>Visual memory for the features of words (how it is written) is essential for accurate spelling.</i>	1-5	18	4.2778	1.01782	.169	.845
	6-10	60	4.2000	.81926		
	10-20	122	4.2705	.75006		
<i>English spelling is a visual repetition. We spell a word correctly because we have seen it once before and we know what it looks like.</i>	1-5	18	4.1667	1.15045	2.705	.069
	6-10	60	3.7667	1.06352		
	10-20	122	4.1066	.89818		

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effects of expertise on perceptions of teaching English phonology. As shown in Table 3 that different groups reported significantly distinct results for statements #1, #2 and 3# $p < 0.05$. In opposition, such effects were not discovered for statements #4, #5, #6, respectively.

5. Discussion

The guiding thought behind this study was the need to explain the causes for Saudi EFL learners' low levels of spelling. While previous studies had mostly been focused on explanations based on the differences between the two languages—the fact that phonemes do not exist in Arabic and, in addition, English orthography is way more different— here we emphasize on teachers' qualifications and the way English is thought as factors affecting learners' spelling proficiency. The researcher set out with three questions to answer as stated under Research Questions.

The first question was to determine whether English teachers believe that explicit phonics instruction should be resorted to with Saudi EFL learners. Overall results show, with a mean value of 3.843, the positive attitude of teachers towards teaching English language sounds. The participants also agree that phonic rules should be taught to early language learners and when introducing the English alphabet.

The second question targeted identifying if language-teaching experience, measured by the number of years of teaching English as a Second Language, influences attitudes towards teaching phonics skills. Results indicate that such experience does influence professors' beliefs regarding the importance of phonic rules. However, these results were mixed and finally showed that there was no relevant difference between groups with different experiences— considering 4 out of 6 evaluated statements. On the other hand, while teachers with more experience (10-20 years) have stronger beliefs that phonic rules should be taught to early language learners, that experience does not have an important role when educators evaluate what is important for spelling teaching, as demonstrated in statements #5 and #6. Nonetheless, the number of participants from the 10-20 years of experience group was much higher (122) than in the other two groups— 60 for the 5-10 group and 18 cases for the 1-5 years group. Therefore, there is confirmatory evidence that those teachers who have been more in contact with learners are more aware of their spelling problems and, thus, more positively inclined toward teaching phonic rules. In more detail, for the first statement that phonic rules ought to be taught to early language learners, the $M=4.14$ $SD=1.06$ was for those who had teaching experience between

10 and 20 years, versus the groups that had experience of 6 to 10 years and 1 to 5, with scores $M=3.65$, $SD=1.13$ and $M=3.42$, $SD=1.28$, respectively. The difference between the two less experienced groups was, therefore, not significant nor even different. The results also indicate that the least experienced group had the lowest score on thinking that phonics instructions were helpful for learners to improve their spelling (statement #2).

The third research question was to determine if Saudi teachers of English have the appropriate knowledge to teach phonics skills. Participants were asked to answer 17 relevant questions and, on average, they provided 8.4 correct answers, which represents only 49.4%. This suggests that teachers overall do not have the appropriate knowledge related to phonics. Moreover, the experience factor does not seem to have a big influence on gaining knowledge, as correct answers vary from question to question. As a matter of fact, these results are very much in line with Kahn-Horwitz's (2015) study outcomes, which show that English teachers generally have quite weak orthographic skills and that those educators with more experience only present a slight advantage in this respect.

As mentioned above, the results obtained in this study seem to be in line with some of the previous research that has been done on the topic, showing that many EFL teachers have limited knowledge of English orthography (Kahn-Horwitz, 2015; Puliatte & Ehri, 2018; Roffman, 2012). Moreover, the inquiry by Kahn-Horwitz, much like our second question, shows that teachers themselves have different views on how spelling should be taught. Our study seems to indicate that a teacher's experience might affect this perception: those who have more experience, in terms of years active, might have a different approach to this question than the less experienced ones.

Putting together the results from our research presents an interesting case. While Roffman (2012) reports that teachers are motivated by their lack of teaching abilities to improve, and Kahn-Horwitz (2015) shows that perceptions over English orthography change according to teachers' knowledge levels—those who have more knowledge are more aware of their shortcomings—our results, on the other hand, indicate that, even with low levels of phonic skills, participants were still aware of the importance of teaching phonic rules and, furthermore, had a positive attitude towards it.

6. Conclusions

This study adds support to the claim that most EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia are aware of English spelling problems, both for themselves and their learners. Nevertheless, some teachers still do not think that English spelling is essential, regardless of the evidence at hand, which shows a progressive relationship between spelling, reading and writing (Ehri, 1986; Kahn-Horwitz et al., 2012; Koda, 2005). What is even more critical is that many EFL teachers do not count on the necessary knowledge of English orthography and, thereby, are not even in a proper position to decide whether their students need further orthographic lessons or not. In addition, even if they do make such a decision, the question remains if they are actually skilled to provide such education.

7. Recommendations

Given the fact that EFL teachers' college programs in Saudi Arabia do not offer specific courses on English orthography, and given evidence from Kahn-Horwitz (2015) which shows that EFL teachers' participation in a semester course on English orthography had a positive effect on feeling more capable of teaching orthographic rules, the main recommendation from this study is to include this kind of training courses for all EFL teachers. Moreover, including these types of courses at the university level of EFL teachers' education, in both an intensive and holistic manner, seems to be very prudent, as well.

8. Limitations

Numbers can be the bane of quantitative research: The researcher feels that though the study sample was reasonable at N= 124, the participants were all from Riyadh region which is mostly a developed, urban part of the country. Therefore, to make the results more reliable, future studies should include teachers from rural universities to have a wider understanding of the issues at hand.

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