

In-Service EFL Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Reading Strategies

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Abstract

Recent trends in teacher education have focused on exploring teachers' beliefs. Earlier studies have shown the important influence of teachers' beliefs on teaching practices. The present study was conducted to explore the beliefs of Saudi EFL teachers about the significance of teaching English reading strategies. The study aimed also to find the influence of these beliefs on their classroom teaching practice. The participants of the present quantitative study were twenty seven Saudi EFL teachers, teaching in different schools in Riyadh. The questionnaire results were collected and the data was analyzed by the use of SPSS program. In the analysis process, the mean for each item was calculated as well as the standard deviation. Then, the results of the teachers' beliefs and the actual practices were correlated to find the relationship between them.

The results, based on questionnaire data, showed that in-service EFL teachers clearly placed great emphasis on the significance of teaching reading strategies. Teachers were found to believe that the most important teaching reading strategies are: "To guess the meaning of the ambiguous vocabulary" (Mean 4.62), "To explain vocabulary items" (Mean 4.48), "To scan the text" (Mean 4.48) and "To ask questions to check the comprehension of the text" (Mean 4.44), whereas they believe that "To translate words into Arabic" (Mean 2.14) is the least important one.

The findings of the current study concluded that what in-service teachers do believe about the efficient strategies of teaching reading, significantly correlates with what they really do in classrooms. The findings suggested that in order to change classroom' practices, EFL teachers need to change what they believe about these practices.

Keywords: teachers' beliefs, EFL, reading strategies

1. Introduction

An understanding of in-service teachers' system of beliefs and its impact on their classroom practices is very critical for the improvement and success of teaching English as a foreign language. Hativa and Goodyear (2002) stated that research on teachers' beliefs has increased in volume in the last two decades. Rimm-Kaufman and Sawyer (2004) argued that the topic of teachers' beliefs has become one of national relevance as a result of the complexity and challenge that teachers face. According to Richardson (2003), teacher education has turned to be highly cognitive. Thus the focus on teachers' beliefs has increased as well. Teachers' beliefs are very critical in understanding a lot of teachers' practices and decisions. An awareness of teachers' beliefs system will help in coming up with innovative thoughts related to EFL teaching, which in turn may result in beneficial EFL teaching implications.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The present study aimed to explore the beliefs of Saudi EFL teachers about teaching reading strategies. It also aimed to explore the relationship between what they believe about teaching reading strategies and their employment of these strategies in classroom practice.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The researchers hope this study would be a vehicle for bringing innovation to the teaching of English in Saudi Arabia by contributing to English teaching methodology. Results of the present study would contribute new insights regarding EFL teaching curricula, specifically with regard to teaching reading strategies in EFL Arabic context.

1.3 Research Questions

The study intended to explore in-service EFL teachers' beliefs regarding teaching English reading strategies and their actual classroom practice. In the course of the current study, the researchers set out to address the following questions:

- 1) What beliefs do in-service Saudi EFL teachers hold about teaching reading strategies?
- 2) What reading strategies do in-service Saudi EFL teachers believe are the most important?
- 3) To what extent do in-service Saudi EFL teachers' beliefs regarding teaching English language reading strategies correspond to classroom teaching practice?

2. Literature Review

There is no doubt that beliefs play a critical role in our life and the way we think and act. Several studies regarding teachers' beliefs showed that teachers were found to hold beliefs about every facet of teaching. Calderhead (1996) stated that teachers were found to have obvious beliefs in five central aspects: "beliefs regarding their students and the process of learning and teaching, subjects to teach or the whole curriculum, learning to teach, and finally, about themselves and the nature of teaching process". He also argued that the beliefs in these aspects are closely related.

2.1 Reading Strategies

According to Goodman (1995) reading can be defined as "the receptive process of written communication". Grabe (1991) argued that "reading skill is not just a receptive process that requires the reader to get information out of the text in a verbatim manner, but it is rather a selective procedure which can be described as a dynamic process of comprehending". Reading is also defined as "a complex process to make meaning out of the text, for various aims and in varied contexts" (Allan & Bruton, 1998). To have successful reading process, language learners need to make use of their background knowledge, adequate awareness of vocabulary items, good understanding of the grammar of the target language, previous experience with written text and further reading strategies in order to better grasp that text (Pang, Muaka, Bernhardt, & Kamil, 2003). It is the role of the teachers to show language learners the various reading strategies that could be used as they construct meaning. Oxford (1990) argued that "reading strategies as a term can be used to refer to learning techniques, and problem-solving skills which in turn can enhance the learning process". Reviewing the literature, Willingham (2006) stated that more than 500 studies have been conducted with a purpose to explore the impact of teaching the various strategies of reading skill in the last twenty five years. Most of those studies have concluded that strategy-based teaching could be seen as a good method to enhance comprehension.

2.2 Teaching Beliefs

Reviewing the literature, you can notice that there are varieties of definitions of the term belief. Clark and Peterson (1986), stated that beliefs can be defined as "conceptions". Ekeblad and Bond (1994) viewed beliefs as "personal theories". Burns (1996) defined beliefs as "theories for practice". Richardson (2003) indicated that despite various meanings, there is significant agreement pertaining to the definition of the term "beliefs" as "psychologically held understandings, premises or propositions about the world that are felt to be true".

2.3 Beliefs and Teaching Practices

Beliefs about second and foreign language learning have come to be the focus of research in the language acquisition field. As stated by Freeman (1989) and Johnson (1990), research on second language teachers' cognition began to appear in the 1990s. Second language teaching researchers started to figure out the critical significance of deeply investigating the various cognitive dimensions of teachers' beliefs, and attitudes, as well as exploring the way these dimensions can influence the nature of teaching. The amount of studies in this field increased in volume in the new era (Borg, 1998). According to Borg (2003), sixty four studies had been published in this field between 1976 and 2002. Unfortunately, most of those studies did not investigate teachers' cognition regarding some areas, but focused on broader aspects such as change, planning, and decision making.

There is a group of studies investigated the link between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. Some of these studies argued that the practices of teachers clearly echo with teachers' beliefs. Johnson (1992) explored the English as a second language teacher' beliefs regarding classroom practices. The researcher concluded that the most of the teachers held clear beliefs which reflect their preferred teaching approaches. The findings showed that accordingly with what believe, teachers planned lessons and create teaching tasks.

In another study by Smith (1996), the researcher examined the relationship between beliefs and decision making of English as a second language teacher. The study found that the design of curriculum, the learning tasks and

teaching approaches selection are clearly influenced by the beliefs of the teachers about language teaching and learning. In this study, the two groups of teachers, one focusing on language for communication purposes and the other focusing on accuracy and grammar, developed activities and designed the curriculum that clearly match what they believe. Similarly, in another study by Johnson (1994), the results came up to conclude that there is an obvious relationship between what teachers believe about second language teaching and pre-service ESL teachers' instructional practices. The study showed that most of the teachers' beliefs were originally influenced by their own learning experiences when they were students.

Chou (2008) studied the construction of teachers' belief regarding the approaches that are used to teach reading skill. The participants were forty two college teachers. The study also investigated the relationship between what teachers do believe regarding the various theories of reading skill and their teaching practice in the English as a foreign language context. However, the study failed to find any significant differences between the subjects' beliefs and the employment of any teaching approach. Kuzborska (2011) conducted a qualitative study to explore the necessity to recognize the beliefs construction of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers, concerning their teaching of reading skill to more linguistically mature English language learners. The findings of this study showed that there is an obvious correlation between what teachers believe and the approaches of teaching they apply in their teaching of English.

However, some researchers failed to conclude consistency between the beliefs of language teachers and their own classroom practices (Fang, 1996; Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, & Thwaite, 2001; Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Khonamri & Salim, 2010). Fang (1996) in his review, highlighted several studies that showed little correlation between the beliefs of the instructors and practices regarding the teaching of reading skill. He concluded that factors of the context of instruction may interfere with the ability of the teachers to reflect and implement what they believe into their classroom teaching practice. Breen et al. (2001) illustrated the complexity of the relationship between what teachers believe and their actual classroom teaching practice. Elicitations and observations procedures were used to explore the relationship between the principles and practices of eighteen instructors in Australia. At a group level, the findings showed that teachers share common principles such as the necessity to cater to learners' individual differences, but they differ from each other in the way they apply this principle. Some teachers were found to offer worksheets with various levels of difficulty, while the other group teach using oral and visual teaching aids.

Similarly, Basturkmen et al. (2004) found inconsistency between second language teachers' beliefs and what they actually do through their classroom teaching practices regarding teaching instruction that focuses clearly on the form of the language. The study showed that there was no consistency between what teachers believe about the appropriateness to teach the forms of the language during a lesson that seems to focus on the meaning. The study also failed to find any significant correlation between the beliefs of the ESL teachers and the type of the techniques used when they correct the mistakes of the learners. They argued that the differences between what teachers believe and their classroom practice are challenges that require resolution.

In a more recent study, Khonamri and Salim (2010) conducted a study to investigate what teachers believe regarding teaching reading strategies of English as a foreign language, and explore the correlation between what they believe and what they actually practice in English teaching classes. The researchers concluded that teachers did not reflect what they believe in their classroom teaching practice. There was no consistency between the beliefs of the teachers and the practices that teachers have reported to do through their teaching. The study concluded no evidence of consistency between what EFL teachers have stated to believe about teaching reading strategies and what they actually practice.

According to the previous review, it could be claimed that the previous research regarding the field of teachers' beliefs and teaching practices suffers from some limitations. The existing studies failed to find agreement about the nature of the relationship between what teachers do believe about the teaching of reading strategies and what they actually practice. Most of the studies have been conducted in "English as first or second language contexts where teachers are native speakers of the language". There is almost no study to date- as far as the researcher knows- conducted to investigate teachers' beliefs regarding teaching reading strategies and classroom EFL teaching practice in Arabic context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study aimed to investigate the beliefs of in-service Saudi EFL teachers about teaching reading strategies, as well as understand the relationship between their beliefs and the actual classroom teaching practice. For the research purposes, twenty seven EFL teachers from Riyadh- the capital city of Saudi Arabia- were randomly

selected to participate as the research subjects. The questionnaires were distributed in hand and online to the participants of the study and they were offered enough time in order to complete all the items before the questionnaire results were collected. The participants were male and female with the percentage of men was 54.55% and the percentage of women was 45.45%. All the participants in the current study had teaching experience ranged from five to twenty five years. The majority (63.64%) had a range of (6-10) years of teaching experience. Some of the participants (27.27%) had a range of one year to five years experience of teaching English. The minority of the participants (9.09%) had less than one year teaching experience. Almost all of them taught secondary school students and some taught intermediate level. Their highest educational qualification was Masters (18.18%), Bachelors (72.73%) and Diploma (9.09%). The participants held certificates in the fields of: TESOL, Education, and the teaching of the English language.

Table 1. Background information of the teachers

Classification	Level	Percentage
Gender	Men	54.55%
	Women	45.45%
Amount of Experience	One year or less	9.09%
	Two to five years	27.27%
	Six to ten years	63.64%
Certificates	Diploma	9.09%
	Bachelor's degree	72.73%
	Master's degree	18.18%

3.2 Instrument

To answer the research questions, a quantitative research method was conducted using a questionnaire survey to explore teachers' beliefs about teaching reading and the relationship between these beliefs and their actual classroom practice. The researchers have adapted the "Teaching Reading Strategies Questionnaire" designed by Chou (2008). The questionnaire consisted of two sections, with 20 items for each one. Every item was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The first part was designed with a purpose of gathering some background information about the participating teachers regarding their genders, amount of experience, and certificates. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A aimed to investigate teachers' beliefs about teaching reading strategies. The participating teachers were required to respond to every item as: (a) not important, (b) less important, (c) somewhat important, (d) very important, (e) extremely important. Section B intended to investigate if teachers were employing reading strategies in their classrooms. In this section, teachers were asked to decide whether they (a) never, (b) seldom, (c) sometimes, (d) usually or (e) always employ the activity.

The researcher conduct a pilot study in which the instrument was administered to a sample of teachers in order to detect any problems related to the instrument and its use. The questionnaire was further reviewed by five professors of language teaching and curriculum to ensure the content validity. The questionnaire's reliability was calculated also by the use of SPSS program, and produced Cronbach α value of 0.932. The questionnaire was put online via <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/H6SMXLD>

3.3 Procedure

The questionnaires of the study were distributed in hand and online to the participants. After enough time, which was appropriate for the participating teachers to complete them, the questionnaires were then collected in order to analyze the data using SPSS "Statistical Package for Social Sciences" program. In the analysis process, the mean for each item was calculated, as well as the standard deviation. Then, the results of the teachers' beliefs and the actual practices were correlated to find the relationship between them.

4. Results

To answer the research's questions, a quantitative analysis of the collected questionnaire data involved descriptive statistics "means, and standard deviations" was run to find out the overall pattern of the beliefs of the participants and their actual teaching practices.

Table 2. Shows the descriptive statistics of the beliefs of teachers regarding the significance of reading strategies

Strategy	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. To explain vocabulary items	4.4815	0.64273
2. To explain grammatical rules	3.7037	0.72403
3. To read the text loudly	3.1481	1.29210
4. To translate words into Arabic	2.1481	0.66238
5. To discuss the background knowledge about the content of the text	4.1481	0.66238
6. To understand the links of every paragraph	4.2593	0.71213
7. To understand the type of the text	4.0741	0.61556
8. To introduce the title of the paragraph	4.3333	0.73380
9. To guess the meaning of the ambiguous vocabulary	4.6296	0.49210
10. To scan the text	4.4815	0.64273
11. To skim the text	4.4074	0.63605
12. To find out the main idea	4.3704	0.49210
13. To summarize the paragraph	4.2222	0.42366
14. To outline the text	3.8519	0.53376
15. To retell the paragraph	3.4815	0.84900
16. To predict the main idea of the next paragraph	3.6296	1.07946
17. To monitor the comprehension of the text	3.5556	0.75107
18. To ask questions to check the comprehension of the text	4.4444	0.64051
19. To use dictionaries to look up words	3.1481	0.66238
20. To use visual aids	4.0000	1.03775

As it can be seen from the table 2, the findings indicated that the means of sixteen out of the twenty items existed in the high range (mean 5-3.5), whereas only three out of twenty items existed in the average range (mean 3.4-2.5). The lasting one item was fitted in the low range (mean 2.4-1). Saudi EFL teachers were found to believe that the most important teaching reading strategies are: "To guess the meaning of the ambiguous vocabulary" (Mean = 4.62), "To explain vocabulary items" (Mean = 4.48), "To scan the text" (Mean = 4.48), and "To ask questions to check the comprehension of the text" (Mean = 4.44). The results showed that the teachers believe that "To translate words into Arabic" (Mean = 2.14) is the least important one. The data provided evidence that Saudi EFL teachers believe that teaching reading strategies are very critical in teaching reading.

The ranking of teachers' beliefs regarding teaching reading strategies:

- 1) To guess the meaning of the ambiguous vocabulary
- 2) To explain vocabulary items
- 3) To scan the text
- 4) To ask questions to check the comprehension of the text
- 5) To skim the text
- 6) To find out the main idea
- 7) To introduce the title of the paragraph
- 8) To understand the links of every paragraph
- 9) To summarize the paragraph
- 10) To discuss the background knowledge about the content of the text
- 11) To understand the type of the text
- 12) To use visual aids

- 13) To outline the text
- 14) To explain grammatical rules
- 15) To predict the main idea of the next paragraph
- 16) To monitor the comprehension of the text
- 17) To retell the paragraph
- 18) To read the text loudly
- 19) To use dictionaries to look up words
- 20) To translate words into Arabic

Table 3. Shows the descriptive statistics of the actual employment of reading strategies

Classroom practice of reading strategies	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. To explain vocabulary items	4.5556	0.50637
2. To explain grammatical rules	3.3704	0.68770
3. To read the text loudly	3.0741	0.95780
4. To translate words into Arabic	1.9630	0.51750
5. To discuss the background knowledge about the content of the text	3.7037	0.72403
6. To understand the links of every paragraph	3.5556	0.75107
7. To understand the type of the text	3.4444	0.93370
8. To introduce the title of the paragraph	4.7407	0.44658
9. To guess the meaning of the ambiguous vocabulary	4.0000	0.55470
10. To scan the text	4.1481	0.66238
11. To skim the text	4.1481	0.86397
12. To find out the main idea	4.2963	0.46532
13. To summarize the paragraph	3.8519	0.66238
14. To outline the text	3.2593	1.05948
15. To retell the paragraph	2.3704	0.88353
16. To predict the main idea of the next paragraph	2.9630	1.22416
17. To monitor the comprehension of the text	3.5556	0.75107
18. To ask questions to check the comprehension of the text	4.5556	0.50637
19. To use dictionaries to look up words	3.6667	0.87706
20. To use visual aids	4.1111	0.84732

The data obtained from the questionnaire about the actual practice of reading strategies (table 3) indicated that the means of thirteen out of twenty items existed in the high range (mean 5-3.5), while five out of twenty items existed in the average range (mean 3.4-2.5). The last two items were fitted in the low range (mean 2.4-1). The results showed that Saudi EFL teachers employ reading strategies in their actual classroom practice. The results also showed that the most frequently employed reading strategies are: "To introduce the title of the paragraph" (Mean = 4.74), "To ask questions to check the comprehension of the text" (Mean = 4.55), and "To explain vocabulary items" (Mean = 4.55). The least frequent strategy is "To translate words into Arabic" (Mean = 1.90). Considering these results, it could be concluded that Saudi EFL teachers were found to apply English language reading strategies in their classroom reading instructions with some strategies being more frequent than others. It could be claimed that there is consistency between what EFL teachers believe regarding teaching reading strategies and their classroom employment of these strategies.

The correlation between Saudi EFL teachers' scores of beliefs and classroom practices was explored using Spearman's rho correlation coefficient.

Table 4. Correlation between what EFL teachers believe about teaching reading strategies and the actual practice

Spearman's rho		Teachers' beliefs	Teachers' actual practice
	Teachers' Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.813
	beliefs Sig. (Two-Tailed)		0.000

*. Significant correlation at the 0.01 level (Two-Tailed).

The results provided evidence that the teachers' beliefs correlated with their actual practice. This significant correlation at the 0.01 level, ($\rho = 0.813$, $\text{sig.} = 0.00$) indicated that there is a consistent relationship between what Saudi EFL teachers believe regarding teaching reading strategies and the actual employment of these strategies. This means that teachers' beliefs regarding teaching reading strategies influence what they actually practice in their classroom teaching.

5. Discussion

The results of the present study showed that Saudi EFL teachers believe that teaching reading strategies are very important. The answers of the questionnaire showed that means of sixteen out of twenty reading strategies existed in the high range (mean 5-3.5). The findings indicated that guessing the meaning of ambiguous vocabulary, explaining vocabulary items, scanning the text, and asking questions to check comprehension are the most significant strategies in teaching reading skill.

The analysis of the results revealed that there is a consistent correlation between what Saudi EFL teachers believe about teaching reading strategies and what they actually practice in their classrooms. There was a significant correlation ($\rho = 0.813$, $\text{sig.} = 0.00$) between EFL teachers' beliefs about the importance of teaching reading strategies and what they actually employ of reading strategies in their classrooms.

The findings of the present study were inconsistent with the findings of some studies in the beliefs literature. For example, Basturkmen et al. (2004) concluded that there is an inconsistent correlation between second language teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom employment related to form-focused instruction. Similarly, Khonamri and Salim (2010) found that teachers do not reflect what they believe in their classroom teaching practice. They also concluded inconsistency between EFL teachers' beliefs and their teaching reading strategies classroom employment. However, the findings of the current study were consistent with the majority of the studies in this field. In a study by Johnson (1992) examining the relationship between English as a second language teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices, the researcher stated that there was a clear relationship between teachers' teaching practices and their beliefs about these practices. Smith (1996) argued that the curriculum design, the selection of learning tasks and teaching approaches are clearly influenced by teachers' beliefs by adapting the approach that matches their beliefs about language teaching. Similarly, Chou (2008) concluded that there was a consistent relationship between the teachers' beliefs and their employment of every teaching approach. The findings of a study by Kuzborska (2011) showed that there is a consistent relationship between what teachers believe and the approaches of teaching they employ in their teaching of English.

6. Conclusion

EFL teachers were found to have specific beliefs about the suitable approach to teach English. However, Saudi EFL teachers' beliefs require more investigation before they can "reflect on their classroom practices". The present study tried to cast some light on Saudi EFL teachers' beliefs about teaching reading strategies. According to the results of the present and previous studies (Johnson, 1994; Smith, 1996; Chou, 2008; Kuzborska, 2011), it could be argued that EFL teachers believe that teaching reading strategies are very significant. The results also showed that there is a positive correlation between what Saudi EFL teachers believe about teaching reading strategies and their actual classroom practices. This means that there is a consistent relationship between what teachers believe about teaching reading strategies and their actual classroom employment.

The results of the current study suggested that the beliefs have powerful influences on teachers' classroom practices. This study suggested that in order to change teachers' practices, there is a need to change their beliefs about these practices. The research literature on exploring EFL teachers' beliefs is sparse and it is the researcher's suggestion that more research is needed.

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