A qualitative analysis: How is elementary reading and writing curriculum constructed by first graders?

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Abstract

In recent years, thanks to global innovations in information technologies, constructivism as an approach which is “building forthcoming knowledge upon previous one in mind” is gaining popularity all around the world. To cope with changing concepts of the world, Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in Turkey has also made some radical changes in primary education curricula since the academic year of 2004-2005. The methods of elementary reading and writing have also been reformed. However, recently reformed elementary reading and writing curriculum is still under debate in terms of how constructive it is to help students learn to read and write. The purpose of this qualitative study was to enlighten in-service teachers and curriculumists and explicit whether a huge gap does really exist between what is on paper and what is implemented according to responses of first grade students to certain tasks. Data were collected from 39 first graders taught at one of public primary schools in Ankara, Turkey in the second semester of the academic year of 2008-2009 when students have already been capable to read and write by means of the phonics method as they were expected to do so. Consisting of questions asking for recognition of block letters, awareness of lineworks done while writing letters, basic grammar rules such as writing cursive uppercase letters of “F, N, P, V, T”, writing homophonic words and finding in-text grammar errors, a task assignment was administered to students in order to gain insight about students’ associating knowledge with preexisting one in their minds. Results indicated that there were some deficiencies about the content and implementation of elementary reading and writing curriculum since what students reflected had some shortcomings and were open to doubt whether they constructed knowledge of elementary reading and writing taught by means of aforementioned curriculum or not. There were also suggestions made in order to revise and reconstruct elementary reading and writing curriculum for providing a better constructive (yet not deconstructive) learning of how to read and write.

Keywords: Constructivism; elementary reading and writing curriculum; first grade; the phonics method.

1. Introduction: Change in Elementary Reading and Writing

The only word that explains our recent world is “change”.

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The time flows and everything tends to change by degrees. The changes, that is, transitions occurred in all aspects of the world may be self-directed and are usually invoked by others. In recent times, transitions from an industrial society to an information society, the changes in production with the shift from Fordism to the flexible system of production, alterations from nation-states to global world and from modern to postmodern way of thinking have a significant effect on educational systems of several countries (Tekeli, 2003). What is expected from education is no longer to enable individuals to compete with others. On the contrary, societies should be educated to compete with each other to challenge with the changing concepts of the world (Dülger, 2002). According to aforementioned changes occurred in country level, numerous countries including Turkey revise and reform also their educational systems to dispel deficiencies, ambiguities and contradictions. As stated by Akpınar and Aydınlı (2007), Turkey’s legislative alignment process of European Union and international educational norms, economical and technological innovations occurred in global level, looking for quality in education, current system’s insufficiency to meet expectations and desire to have an educational system that contributes to economical development, and finally, unfavorable PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2003 and 2006 results are among those reasons behind recent educational reforms made in Turkey.

Since there is no problem being faced to while accessing knowledge thanks to global technological innovations, individuals as learners are able to cope with changeable concepts of the world without any delay. As a result, constructivism as an approach which is “accessing and building forthcoming knowledge by a learner him/herself upon prior one in his/her mind” is gaining popularity all around the world. With respect to this, considering constructivist approach, Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in Turkey has made some radical changes in primary education curricula including the scopes of Turkish, Mathematics, Life Studies, Social Studies, Science & Technology courses and so many on since the academic year of 2004-2005. Within the framework of curricula reform, curricula delivered by MoNE are learner centered and sensitive to individual differences and enriched not only with multiple intelligence practices, but also spiral, thematic and skill approaches (Educational Reform Initiative [ERI], 2005). The methods of elementary reading and writing have also been reformed. The phonics method was suggested to be used while teaching reading and writing instead of the whole sentence method which has almost been used for many years. Elementary reading and writing curriculum which is a part of first grade Turkish curriculum has already been begun to be implemented in both public and private primary schools.

Debates over teaching and learning elementary reading and writing beginning from early childhood years of children are still going on. The development of preschool phonological sensitivity depends on abilities such as oral language, letter knowledge and experiences yielded by home literacy environment (Burgess, 2006). Considering oral language and letter knowledge, Carroll, Roenker, & Sears (1980) found the order in which children learn to name letters as follows: (1) Children name letters when they were asked in an alphabetical order, (2) children name letters that are frequently used in language such as “r, s, and t”, (3) children name letters according to their critical features e.g. “b” is reversal of “d”. However, instruction in letter names and sounds alone did not significantly improve the classification skills, the early reading skills, or the spelling skills of the kindergarten children. Phoneme awareness instruction, combined with instruction connecting the phonemic segments to alphabet letters, significantly improved the early reading and spelling skills of them (Ball & Blanchman, 1991). But before phonemic awareness instruction, as stated by Yangın (2009), readiness is an important factor in students’ reading and writing performances. The findings of this study suggest that school readiness should exist and involve the development of cognitive and linguistic skills such as understanding concepts and verbal statements, comparing and contrasting, distinguishing between similarities and differences, matching, categorizing and copying in general rather than the technical aspects of reading and writing instruction, such as sound-letter relationships and phonemic awareness.

Recently reformed elementary reading and writing curriculum is still under debate in terms of how constructive it is to help students learn to read and write. The purpose of this study was to enlighten in-service teachers and curricularists and explicit whether a huge gap does really exist between what is on paper and what is implemented. This study was anticipated to be a contribution to the literature in terms of investigating whether students seem to construct what they have learned about elementary reading and writing in their minds regarding their responses to certain tasks.
1.1. Goals and characteristics of the current first grade elementary reading and writing curriculum

The first grade elementary reading and writing curriculum aims to enable students to read and write effectively and thoroughly (MoNE, 2005). There is no precise amount of time devoted but it is usually expected that students are able to read and write till the end of the first semester of the academic year. It can be inferred that elementary reading and writing curriculum encompasses mostly the first semester of the academic year.

Critical and creative thinking, problem solving, students’ being aware of the way they learn as a metacognitive learning skill, effective use of Turkish etc. are among those major skills mentioned in elementary reading and writing curriculum to be acquired by the students. The recently reformed first grade elementary reading and writing curriculum is based on constructivist approach supported by multiple-intelligence theory and practices, brain-based learning, active learning and problem-based learning. The curriculum puts learners in the heart of the implementation. Individual differences are also taken into consideration. Besides those theoretical innovations, there are also practical innovations in terms of instructional strategies, methods and techniques as in the following: the phonics method, the phonogroups and cursive writing (MoNE, 2005).

The phonics method advocates that the instructional process begins with the phonies. Clustered phonies form a syllable, clustered syllables form a word and clustered words form a sentence (Johnston & Watson, 2003). The method of phonics derives from the idea of “Read what is written and write what is read.” which is also a motto of this method. Cursive letters are used while teaching how to write. Some characteristics of the phonics method are like the following: (1) students’ prior knowledge are taken into consideration, (2) the most common technique used in this method is synthesis, (3) studying with meaningful syllables is given prior and importance, (4) it takes a short time to form a sentence, (5) audiovisual materials such as pictures and educational software etc. are made of use, (6) the table of syllables which has been used for many years is no longer used in this method since there is no point in teaching reading and writing with meaningless syllables (MoNE, 2005). Otherwise, there is an inescapable threat of students’ memorizing those syllables. A major issue to be concerned is how or whether first grade students construct syllables that do not make any sense such as “ub” in their minds.

Since first grade children usually draw italic or circular lines before beginning to write and have a tendency of leaning their pencils, cursive letters are utilized while teaching how to write. According to easiness of writing, phonetic structure of Turkish language and its utility for forming meaningful syllables and words, six different phonogroups are identified as follows: (1) e, l, a, t; (2) i, n, o, r, m; (3) u, k, ō, y, s, d; (4) ö, b, ü, ú, z, ç; (5) g, c, p, h; (6) ğ, v, f, j (MoNE, 2005).

Implementation begins with preparation for reading in terms of teaching how to sit on a desk appropriately, how to use books effectively from an appropriate and adequate distance, how to talk or tell about visuals (pictures, illustrations, photographs, cartoons etc.). By reading stories, novels, poems, songs, rhymes etc., teachers also make students have positive attitudes towards reading. Preparation for writing begins with finger and hand practices and goes on with painting, picking a pencil, irregular and regular lineworks. By elementary reading and writing, short stories, drama, rhymes and songs are utilized to make students recognize phonies. With regard to this, pictures are also used to make students distinguish related phonemes. The letters are shown on the board by the teacher and are read with students. Students are made write letters and read thoroughly. This is also a case for forming syllables, words and sentences (MoNE, 2005).

2. Method

This study is of qualitative nature since qualitative aspects were used to draw a clear picture of how or whether students can make sense out of what they have learned about elementary reading and writing which was investigated by content analyses of their writing samples taken from a task assignment administered to them. As stated by Fraenkel and Wallen (2006), content analysis is a technique that enables researchers to study human behaviour in an indirect way, through an analysis of their communications such as words, pictures, images etc.
2.1. Population and Sample

The population of interest consisted of 39 first grade students aged between 6 and 8 from one of public primary schools in Ankara, Turkey. The subjects of this study were purposefully selected among first grade students at this school which has offered a full day program.

2.2. Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

In the second semester of the academic year of 2008-2009, when students have already been capable to read and write by means of the phonics method as they were expected to do so, the data were collected through a task assignment consisting of questions asking for recognition of block letters, awareness of lineworks done while writing letters, basic grammar rules such as writing cursive uppercase letters of “F, N, P, V, T”, writing homophonic words and finding in-text grammar errors. During data collection, first grade students admitted to this study were informed that they were not assigned an examination and were also assisted when they had trouble with tasks. All subjects were assured that any data gathered from or about them will be held in confidence by assigning codes such as S1 for the first student’s task assignment and so on due to anonymity of subjects. Assignments administered to first grade students were subjected to content analysis in which coherent examples, themes and patterns were identified (Patton, 1987). For instance, data obtained from assignments especially for the first task were categorized under certain themes such as title, indent, between the lines, explanations consisting of specific mistakes of students and sentence completion. Data obtained from the remaining tasks will be reported in terms of frequencies and percentages.

3. Findings

As mentioned before, first grade students participated in this study were administered a task assignment. For the first task, in order to gain insight about their handwriting samples, they were expected to rewrite a text titled “Karpuz ile Armut” (“Watermelon and Pear” in English) with cursive letters and also to complete the end of the text appropriately. Data obtained from their handwritings were sorted into certain categories known as themes as follows: title, indent, between the lines, explanations consisting of specific mistakes of students and sentence completion. For the theme of “title”, among 39 first grade students, only two of them wrote the title of “Karpuz ile Armut” without any errors. One of them wrote the title with uppercase letters but not with cursive letters whereas 33 of them wrote the title with cursive letters but not with uppercase letters. Three of them were completely wrong with writing the title of the text. When considering 2.54 cm. margins of indent, data were categorized as a dichotomous response of “yes” or “no”. Eight of them gave attention to indent the paragraphs. However, the remaining 31 students did not consider it. Approximately 92% of students’ sentences were not between the lines given under the text. Only 3 students wrote sentences regarding those four lines with three blanks of which they were thought to be aware by regular lineworks. Considering students’ specific mistakes clustered under the theme of explanations, about 44% of them had trouble in writing letters such as b, e, f, h, j, k and l. They have miswritten the word of “tiyatro” (“theatre” in English) such as “tiratro”, “tiyotra”, “tiyatra”, “tiyolro”, “tiatro”, “tiyartro”, “tiyaro”, “tiratro” and “liyatro” due to repeating words while writing as it was observed. Among those, 24 of them wrote sentences that do not belong to the text given since it was observed that they had tendency to use their own words and sentences that are not associated with the given text. Had 18% of them trouble when writing a word of “diğer” (“other” in English). They seemed to be puzzled between “y” and “ı” (g-breve). Three of 39 students were aware of when to use hyphen (-). Students were reluctant to complete the end of the text. 67% of them did not write even a letter. Students wrote some sentences that had some weaknesses in terms of logic behind those sentences and grammar rules.

For the second task, first grade students were asked to associate given letters (j and f) with certain lineworks and given lineworks with certain letters (t, n, d). As it is known, first grade students are offered to do some lineworks to be ready for elementary reading and writing. Beginning with doodling, they do both irregular and regular lineworks such as broken and curved lines etc. to get fluency while writing in the first one month or one and a half months of the academic year (MoNE, 2005; Bilir, 2005). It can be concluded that 56.4% of the students were aware of lineworks they did while writing letters of “ı” and “n” while 25.6% of them were aware of lineworks they did while
writing all letters, “t”, “n” and “d”. Among all, only two of them did well while doing lineworks of letters “j” and “f”.

For the third task, students were asked to fill in the blanks with cursive uppercase letters of “F, N, P, V, T”. As a rule, those letters cannot be written adjacent to the forthcoming letters (MoNE, 2005). The results indicated that only two of 39 students wrote all of those letters separately from the next letter whereas four of them wrote neither of those letters correctly.

For the fourth task, students were expected to form sentences using homophonic words of “lale” and “ela”. As stated by Caramazza, Costa, Miozzo and Bi (2001), homophones are words which have the same pronunciation but are different from each other in meaning, spelling, or grammatical class such as rose (a flower) and rose (past tense of “rise”). In Turkish, there are also lots of homophones to be used. In that task, “lale” in Turkish refers to a flower (“tulip” in English) and also a first name of females of which its first letter must be capitalized as “Lale”. “Ela” also refers to a first name of females of which its first letter must be capitalized and an eye color (“hazel” in English) as “ela”. In this task, students were asked to recognize those words, construct them in their minds and form sentences. Eleven of 39 students could not make up sentences by using words “lale” and “ela”. Nine of them utilized the word “ela” as a proper noun and wrote it with a capital letter as follows: “Ela”. Eight students made up sentences with words of “Ela” and “lale”. Surprisingly, only one of the students formed a sentence by using a word of “ela” with a meaning of an eye color. Only one of the students used “Lale” as a proper noun considering a name of a girl or a woman.

For the last fifth task, first grade students were asked to find errors in a given text titled “Oya ile Bora’nın Yaz Tatili (“Summer Holiday of Oya and Bora” in English). There were seven mistakes to be found in that text: (1) first paragraph unindented, (2) disuse of a full stop at the end of the first sentence, (3) “b” as a lowercase letter at the beginning of the sentence, (4) “d” as a first but lowercase letter of a proper noun, (5) “a” as a lowercase letter at the outset of the sentence, (6) “Y” as a capital letter of a homophone although it is not a proper noun, (7) disuse of an apostrophe. Among 39 first grade students, only one of them noticed that the first paragraph was not indented. Only four of them realized that “y” was capitalized although the word beginning with “y” was not a proper noun whereas six of them found out that the letter “d” was miswritten although it was at the outset of a proper noun. The fifth above mentioned mistake was found only by ten first grade students whereas the third mistake was captured by twelve of them. Disuse of a full stop at the end of the first sentence was noticed by one third of all students. However, none of them captured disuse of an apostrophe that is used to show ownership or possession.

4. Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

According to cognitive views of development, learning is defined as alterations occurred in a person’s mental structures that yield the capacity to expose different behavioral patterns. Those mental structures consist of knowledge, beliefs, goals, expectations and other components located in the learner’s head (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001 as cited in Sowell, 2005). By engaging in mental activities or experiences, individuals as learners create their own knowledge for themselves and learners’ psychological environments are adapted and organized by their mental structures. Throughout learning, there is always a perpetual matching of mental structures with experiences aiming to reach a balance which is also called an adaptation, a putting in equilibrium of a complementary accommodation and assimilation (Piaget, 1953; Sowell, 2005). The case of constructive learning in this study is a controversial issue to be discussed according to the results. It can be concluded that students had trouble in making connections between prior and further knowledge and therefore they were weak in reaching a cognitive balance mentioned above. Students had most often difficulty in rewriting a text given with block letters, associating lineworks they did at the outset of the academic year with letters given and in grammar rules such as writing some cursive uppercase letters, forming sentences using homophonic words and finally finding mistakes made in a given text. Those issues can also be a result of teacher incompetencies in internalizing and implementing recently reformed elementary reading and writing curriculum that was also supported by another study which aims to determine problems faced during the implementation of the phonics method regarding views of classroom teachers. In this qualitative study, half of classroom teachers (N=26) interviewed felt themselves incompetent with the phonics method since some had either a lack of knowledge or an experience due to a lack of in-service trainings about the phonics method and its implementation (Erkul & Erdogan, 2009). However, this is not a problem as crucial as curriculum deficiencies since
teachers are assigned to implement what is on paper for teaching. To give an opinion, following suggestions can be set up for dispelling those deficiencies:

According to the results of this study, students had trouble in writing letters such as b, e, f, h, j, k and l. Considering their calligraphic characteristics, each of them has a loop in common as seen in the following: b, e, f, h, j, k and l. Hence, phonogroups should be reorganized according to letters’ calligraphic characteristics since it is thought that it will be easy for first grade students to study with letters that have same calligraphic characteristics as suggested. Because most of the students could not associate lineworks they did at the beginning of the academic year with letters given in the alternatives, logic behind those should be discussed with students and teachers should teach letters associating with lineworks they taught and should return back to them to make students practice and improve their writing styles at times.

Grammar rules are integrated into the current curriculum implemented but results indicated that grammar rules should also be more focused since most of the students could not also write sentences by using homophonic words “ela” and “lale” and had difficulty in finding mistakes in the text given. Additionally, students were not aware of writing cursive uppercase letters of “F, N, P, V, and T”. The logic behind this rule should be debated with students since they can construct knowledge that makes sense to them.

References

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