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Cultural Aspects of EFL Reading Acquisition

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Abstract

The significance of EFL literacy goes beyond success at school and may affect a person's level of income and opportunity. Evidently, EFL classes all around the world consist of pupils with diverse learning needs and different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to which teachers are expected to attend. This article depicts the effect of various factors, specifically cultural factors, on EFL reading acquisition. The article presents partial findings of the quantitative research in a doctoral thesis that addressed perceptions and practices regarding reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multicultural environment.

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1. Introduction

There is consensus among researchers that acquiring good reading abilities is critical for success in the 21st century and it can affect levels of income and opportunity for people. Since English serves as an international language, it is not enough to be literate in one's native tongue and there is a strong need to be literate in English as well.

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Evidently, EFL teachers in Israel, as well as all around the world, are expected to provide differential instructions for students with diverse learning needs including different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Recent changes in the Israeli education system require teachers to provide small group instruction outside the classroom framework to promote learners' abilities. The English inspectorate in Israel has made it a priority to use these hours for promoting EFL reading abilities. Apparently, much has been written about the nature of reading and learning to read. However, no research was found regarding the acquisition of EFL reading among emergent readers in small group frameworks in a multi-cultural learning environment.

This article presents partial findings of the quantitative research in a doctoral thesis dealing with perceptions and practices regarding reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multicultural environment. The article presents the findings emerging from the following research question: **How can cultural factors influence reading acquisition in EFL?** and focuses on the effect of various factors on EFL reading acquisition.

2. Reading Acquisition in EFL

Reading is a complex process which involves different purposes and varying processes demanding different abilities (Grabe, 1991). In addition, the knowledge that a reader brings to the text is crucial for comprehension (Day and Bamford, 1998) since readers interpret texts in different ways depending on the schemata activated by the text (Nuttall, 2000). Evidently, reading as opposed to speaking is acquired and must be explicitly taught (Shaywitz, 2003; Koda, 2007). Hence, reading instruction is most significant and so is the way a child learns how to transform symbols into sounds and then into meaningful words, sentences and paragraphs (Shaywitz, 2003).

Another significant factor to consider when discussing reading acquisition is home culture and parents' role. This includes the quantity and quality of parental talking to children while they learn to talk and expand their vocabulary way before they enter school (Risley, 2005), as well as parent-pre-schooler reading experiences, which are connected to growth in lexical and semantic content of language and developing literacy (Muter, 2005). Given this, a person's experience in his or her first years of life affects his or her future intellectual ability. In this respect parents have a significant role in developing their children's reading abilities by simply providing a good oral base for reading acquisition. Apparently, language reading abilities are similar in terms of cognitive processing however, differences in the orthography of the language affect the time it takes to acquire reading and the level of difficulties some learners may encounter (Lindan-Thompson and Vaughn, 2007).

Naturally, when learning to read in a foreign language, learners are already equipped with reading skills in their first language. However, foreign language reading is a distinct cognitive activity since there are differences in foreign language proficiency, orthographic systems, fluency, and processing abilities as well as first language transfer and interference factors. Nevertheless, effective instructional practices in first language settings will also be effective in second and foreign language settings (Grabe, 2004).

3. Cross-Linguistic Transfer and Literacy Skills

Research has proven that language transfer occurs throughout all stages of second or foreign language learning and in all linguistic domains including reading (Schneider and Evers, 2009). Evidentially, basic linguistic abilities have been identified as predictors of reading acquisition across languages implying that basic linguistic abilities that facilitate successful first language (L1) reading have a similar effect on the acquisition of foreign language reading. Thus, difficulty in L1 processing is expected to be reflected in second and foreign language processing as well (Kahn-Horwitz, Shimron and Sparks, 2005).

Correspondingly, the quality and degree of knowledge of first language influence the success of transfer from first language to second language. The stronger and more advanced the English language learners' competence in first language, the better their performance in second language (Schneider and Evers, 2009). Thus, success in second language learning depends on knowledge of structures in the first language (Cummins, 1979, 1984 cited by Kahn-Horwitz, Shimron and Sparks, 2005, Schneider and Evers, 2009; Melby-Lervag and Lervag, 2011).

Furthermore, structural similarities and differences between languages can either facilitate or hinder the acquisition of second language. Inevitably, it should be easier to learn a second language that is closer to their first language than a language that has a very different structure since structural differences might lead to errors in

second language while structural similarities might lead to an easier acquisition of second language due to learners' recognition of features that are common to both languages (Melby-Lervag and Lervag, 2011).

Certainly, students learning to read in different settings, at different institutions, and with varying levels of instructional training and resource support will have different learning goals, and varying comprehension goals with each task they carry out. Thus, second language as well as foreign language reading instruction should be sensitive to students' needs and goals and larger institutional contexts (Grabe, 2009).

4. Multicultural Language Education and EFL Reading Acquisition

Since culture is involved in all learning, teachers are required to be culturally sensitive and relate to their students as individuals understanding sociocultural-historical contexts that influence their interactions (Edwards and Klinger, 2006). Thus, another significant factor that needs to be considered by teachers while teaching reading is the multicultural diversity of their students and how different cultural aspects affect their students' learning in general and their EFL reading in particular.

Research has demonstrated that language acquisition and socialization are two sides of the same coin since the language acquisition process is greatly affected by the process of becoming a competent member of society, which in turn is recognized to a large extent through language, by acquiring knowledge of its function, social distribution, and interpretations in and across socially defined situations. Evidently, children from a very early age are socialized into culturally specific modes of organizing knowledge, thought, and communicative style through different processes. Furthermore, children from different cultures are driven in different directions by models held by adults around them. In addition, different language goals and programs are implemented in a variety of forms following culturally specific norms. Certainly culture-specific communicative competence and socialization patterns play a significant role in the process of language acquisition and the development of language skills (Minami and Ovando, 2004).

The term culture refers to behaviours, customs, attitudes, traditions, values and beliefs of a specific community as well as its *culture of learning*. Culture of learning can be reflected in expectations of students in terms of how they will be taught EFL (Tomlinson, 2005; Aronin and Spolsky, 2010) and their preferred learning (Tomlinson, 2005) - some cultures appreciate authoritative teaching styles and in some educational cultures a dominant strategy is memorization (Aronin and Spolsky, 2010). Culture of learning can also be reflected in expectations of students in terms of their participation – in some cultures of learning, it is expected that students only respond to teacher questions or requests, while in others they are often expected to take the initiative. It can also be reflected in learning focuses – in some cultures, materials are expected to focus mainly on grammar teaching, while in others reading texts are the main focus (Ur, 2012). Clearly, English language learners bring different attributes including cultural and linguistic knowledge into the classroom; however, in many cases they are required to handle complex training processes that are different from their own personal learning experiences and in turn affect their reading acquisition (Orosco and O'Connor, 2014 cite Snow, 2002).

Evidently, the social context of learning as well as cultural norms, affect learners' expectations and behaviour. Furthermore, research show that social attitudes towards English language learning, social exposure to the language and schematic knowledge influence language acquisition in general and the acquisition of EFL in particular (Hedge, 2000). Hence, the starting point of English language teaching must be explorations of students' cultures, knowledge and histories in challenging, affirming and supportive ways (Tomlinson, 2005). In addition, teachers need to be aware of the cultural biases embedded in their own teaching method, their selection of activities, their presentation style and their expectations of students (Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot, 2010). In fact, reading comprehension performance is strongly related to cultural bias. Therefore teachers' awareness of cultural schemata is essential in order to avoid confusing poor reading comprehension with cultural confusion. This is even more critical when assessing reading (Rosowsky, 2000).

Inevitably, culturally relevant teaching is a significant component of literacy instruction in culturally diverse classrooms (Drucker, 2003). Culturally sensitive 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 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 and Klinger, 2006). Naturally, some learners encounter difficulties when learning to read; in such cases intervention is essential. In order 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). The familiarity with students' cultural and linguistic background and the understanding of the conditions within which learners' reading development takes place will not only ensure providing learners with the ideal context for instruction, as mentioned earlier, but also get teachers familiar with how these influence students' motivation and reading development and in turn allow teachers to implement a more culturally sensitive approach (Orosco and O'Connor, 2014).

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. 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 get an impression of and form questions for the next research tool to ascertain issues related to 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 analyzed statistically. This article presents some of the findings emerging from the quantitative phase of the research. The study was conducted in Jewish and Arab schools in the Northern area of Israel in 2014. The research population included 45 English teachers (Jewish and Arab) in the Northern area of Israel who use small group hours for promoting emergent readers and developing their reading abilities in their second year of EFL studies.

6. Results

In the current research, teachers' attitudes towards working with culturally diverse groups and teachers' beliefs about promoting reading abilities in culturally diverse groups were examined. Table 1 presents teachers' observations regarding the effect of various factors on EFL reading acquisition divided into three main categories – "students' L1 background", "students' social, economic and cultural background", and "parents' intervention and attitude". Accordingly, Figure 1 presents the average extent of the effect of these various factors on EFL reading acquisition.

Table 1: Extent of factors affecting EFL reading acquisition

	To low extent	To medium extent	To high extent	Total	Total	Mean	Std Deviation
Student's linguistic background	6.67%	24.44%	68.89%	100.00%	N=45	3.98	1.01

Student having a good base in L1	8.89%	6.67%	84.44%	100.00%	N=45	4.16	.98
The nature of pupil's L1	4.44%	13.33%	82.22%	100.00%	N=45	4.16	.82
L1 interference	6.67%	37.78%	55.56%	100.00%	N=45	3.71	.97
The effect of students' L1 background – calculated index					N=45	4.00	.78
Student's social background	15.56%	35.56%	48.89%	100.00%	N=45	3.60	1.12
Student's economical background	20.00%	42.22%	37.78%	100.00%	N=45	3.29	1.06
Student's home cultural background	8.89%	31.11%	60.00%	100.00%	N=45	3.73	1.05
The effect of students' social , economic and home cultural background – calculated index					N=45	3.54	.90
Parental involvement	11.11%	22.22%	66.67%	100.00%	N=45	3.82	.96
Parents' knowledge and ability to support learning	6.67%	20.00%	73.33%	100.00%	N=45	3.93	.86
Parents' and student's attitude of English as a value	4.44%	11.11%	84.44%	100.00%	N=45	4.29	.92
Parents' and student's view of learning as a value	6.67%	13.33%	80.00%	100.00%	N=45	4.27	.94
Student's exposure to target language	2.22%	15.56%	82.22%	100.00%	N=45	4.31	.82
Student's exposure to literacy from a very young age	8.89%	20.00%	71.11%	100.00%	N=45	4.04	1.07
Parents promoting and encouraging reading from a very young age	11.11%	13.33%	75.56%	100.00%	N=45	4.20	1.06
The effect of parents' intervention and attitude–calculated index					N=45	4.12	.73
The effect of various factors on EFL reading acquisition - calculated index					N=45	3.89	.65

Table 1 reveals that the average extent of **the effect of students' L1 background** on EFL reading acquisition is high (average score of 4.00 out of 5). In this respect the following factors were found to have the highest influence on reading acquisition: **"student having a good base in L1"** (4.16) and **"the nature of pupil's L1"** (*in terms of orthography, sound system' etc.*) (4.16). **"L1 interference"** on the other hand was found to have the lowest effect on EFL reading acquisition (3.71).

Table 1 also reveals that the average extent of **the effect of students' social, economic and cultural background** on EFL reading acquisition was found to be medium-high (average score of 3.54 out of 5). In this regard **"student's home cultural background"** was graded to have the highest effect on reading acquisition (3.75) while **"student's economical background"** was graded to have the lowest effect on reading acquisition.

Finally, Table 1 reveals that the average extent of the effect of **"parental intervention and attitude"** on EFL reading acquisition was found to be high (average score of 4.12 out of 5). In this regard the factors that were found to have the highest effect on reading acquisition were **"student's exposure to target language"** (4.31), **"parents' and student's attitude to English as a value"** (4.29) and **"parents' and student's view of learning as a value"** (4.27). **"Parental involvement"** in the process of EFL reading acquisition on the other hand was found to have the lowest effect on reading acquisition (3.82).

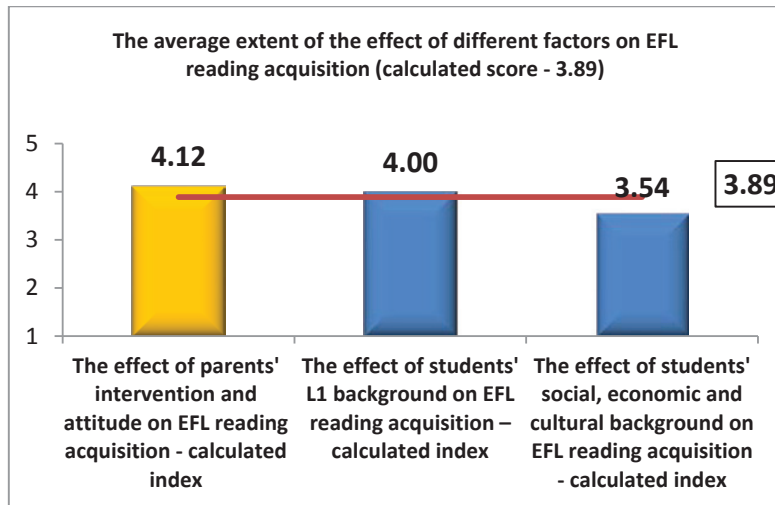


Figure 1: Average extent of factors affecting EFL reading acquisition

Figure 1 reveals that the average extent of the effect of different factors on EFL reading acquisition was found to be medium-high (average score of 3.89 out of 5). In this regard **"parents' intervention and attitude"** was found to have the highest effect on EFL reading acquisition (4.12) while **"students' social, economic and home cultural background"** was found to have the lowest effect on EFL reading acquisition (3.54).

All in all, the quantitative research revealed that **"students' social, economic, home cultural background"** as well as **"parental intervention and attitude"** affected EFL reading acquisition. However, **"parental intervention and attitude"** seemed to have the highest effect.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, the findings show that amongst the cultural aspects affecting pupils' EFL reading acquisition, parental interventions and attitudes seems to have the greatest effect. This finding can be explained by the significant role parents play in children development in general and language acquisition in particular, being a role model as well as the main source of exposure to language and literacy in children's first years.

This finding is supported by the literature which discusses a number of factors affecting EFL acquisition including social attitudes towards English language learning and exposure to the language, learners' development of their vocabulary knowledge and schematic knowledge (Hedge, 2000). More specifically, children are affected by models portrayed by adults around them. Since language goals and development of language skills are directed by culturally specific norms and socialization patterns, children from different cultures are driven in different directions in the process of language acquisition (Minami and Ovando, 2004). Thus, students' culture of learning will affect their expectations in terms of participation (Ur, 2012), teaching style, and teaching strategies (Aronin and Spolsky, 2010) as well as in terms of learning focuses (Ur, 2012). Therefore, teachers need to be aware of the kind of behaviours that are driven from students' cultural values and direct their instruction to cater for different cultural groups (Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot, 2010).

In conclusion, this article depicted EFL reading acquisition as a holistic – integrative multi-cultural process, which involves three main cultural domains, i.e., student home culture-related factors, teacher-related factors and policy-maker related factors. Therefore, culturally related differences of EFL learners should be considered by teachers as well as policy makers both in the context of assessing reading abilities and reading instruction.

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