**Theory and Reported Practice in EFL Literacy Instruction: EFL Teachers’ Perceptions about Classroom Practices**

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**Abstract**

Acquiring literacy in English as a foreign language (EFL) is important for language development. However, many students enter middle school without adequate EFL literacy skills. This may indicate a gap between EFL literacy instruction theory and the classroom practice that is occurring in elementary school classrooms. The aim of this study was to explore the components of EFL literacy instruction as perceived by teachers. The study investigated whether perceptions of classroom practices are theoretically based, thus shedding light on the gap between EFL literacy theory and practice. The participants were167 EFL elementary school teachers, who submitted anonymous online questionnaires regarding their reported EFL teaching in year one, two, three, four and five of elementary school. The research was based on the five pillars of literacy instruction for English as a first language (National Reading Panel, 2000), and additional EFL components (August& Shanahan, 2006). Results of this study showed that EFL teachers expressed views that may indicate a gap between teachers’ practices and most cutting-edge research. The study concluded that providing EFL elementary school teachers with theoretical knowledge may lead to more productive literacy programs and may improve classroom practices.

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language (EFL), teacher perceptions, literacy instruction, theoretically based instruction

English as a foreign language (EFL) is of utmost importance in the Israeli educational system. Additionally, EFL is a prerequisite for entry into higher education and increases an individual’s prospects for international business endeavors and travel (Kahn-Horwitz, 2016). However, there seems to be a gap between EFL literacy theory and practice, leading many students to display reading difficulties in middle school. This may have been caused by inadequate literacy instruction in elementary school (Vellutino & Scanlon, 2001). Teachers might lack awareness of the theoretically based teaching components needed for effective literacy instruction (Moats, 2014). This study explores whether perceptions of classroom practices are theoretically based, shedding light on the gap between EFL literacy theory and practice.

The introduction first discusses research of English as a first language (L1) literacy instruction based on the five pillars of literacy instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000). The next section presents theories of EFL literacy instruction in relation to L1 instruction (Joshi, Washburn, & Kahn-Horwitz, 2016) and discusses EFL literacy instruction in Israel. Finally, the objectives, research question and hypothesis of this study are presented.

**The Five Pillars of Literacy Instruction in English as a First Language**

The five pillars of literacy are phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Phonemic awareness is the ability to focus on phonemes in spoken words and manipulate them in language activities (Adams, 1990; Brady & Moats, 1997; Cassidy, Valadez, & Garrett, 2010) and is considered the most powerful predictor of later reading success at the beginning of reading instruction. Explicit phonemic awareness instruction is required to acquire phoneme-grapheme correspondence (Brady & Moats, 1997; Shankweiler & Fowler, 2004).

Phonics is essential for literacy acquisition. Reading programs that systematically taught phonology, orthography and phonics, including the explicit instruction of spelling (Shankweiler & Fowler, 2004) improved word recognition, spelling, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (Adams, 1990; Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, & Seidenberg, 2001). Literature shows that there is a high correlation between initial weak decoding skills and later poor reading comprehension (Brady & Moats, 1997; Moats, 2000; Shankweiler & Fowler, 2004). The English language has a deep orthography. Implications of this orthographic depth is that L1 English speakers required two and a half years to master decoding, in contrast to L1 speakers of different European languages, who only required only one year of instruction to master decoding (Seymour, Aro, & Erskine, 2003). Furthermore, phonics instruction throughout elementary school years contributes to English literacy acquisition.

Reading fluency is one of the strongest predictors of reading ability (Begeny, Ross, Greene, Mitchell, & Whitehouse, 2012; Rasinski, 2012) and has been shown to make exclusive contributions to reading comprehension (Katzir et al., 2006; Quirk & Beem, 2012). Fluency is the ability to read texts quickly, effortlessly and with meaningful expression (Begeny et al., 2012; National Reading Panel, 2000). This allows readers to reserve their limited cognitive resources for comprehension (Adams, 1990; Rasinski, 2012).

A wide-range of knowledge of vocabulary in texts has been shown to highly affect reading comprehension (Brusnighan & Folk, 2012; Grabe, 2009a; Moats, 2000; Samuels, 2002; Schmitt, Jiang, & Grabe, 2011). According to the lexical quality hypothesis, knowledge of form and meaning of words, this enables the reader to comprehend texts (Perfetti & Hart, 2002; Perfetti, 2007). Instruction should include a deeper understanding of the various ways words are used in the language (Kim, Capotosto, Hartry, & Fitzgerald, 2011). Additionally, spelling instruction is extremely important to develop high quality lexical representations (Hersch & Andrews, 2012).

Regarding reading comprehension, the Simple View of Reading maintains that reading comprehension is the product of two abilities (Gough &Tunmer, 1986). The first is decoding, the ability to read decontextualized words and the second is linguistic comprehension, the ability to understand spoken language. At the beginning stages of L1 literacy acquisition, reading comprehension is mostly explained by decoding skills, whereas in later stages the contribution of linguistic comprehension grows (Georgiou, Das, & Hayward, 2009; Primor, Pierce, & Katzir, 2011). While both are essential, neither of these alone are enough for achieving reading comprehension, which requires students to read and extract meaning by interacting with the text (Carver, 1998; Grabe, 2009c; Primor et al., 2011; Solis et al., 2012).

To efficiently develop literacy, instruction must include all five pillars and be explicit, systematic and sequential (National Reading Panel, 2000). However, many English L1 teachers may lack theoretically based literacy instruction knowledge (Spear-Swerling & Zibulsky, 2014). In a study done in Canada, England, New Zealand, and the U.S., preservice teachers of elementary grades were found to lack basic knowledge of language constructs (Washburn, Binks-Cantrell, Joshi, Martin-Chang, & Arrow, 2016). Another issue examined was time devoted to L1 literacy instruction. Research was conducted with the Language Arts Activity Grid (LAAG), where elementary school teachers were asked to report the amount of time that they would devote to literacy activities if they were planning this time themselves (Cunningham, Zibulsky, Stanovich,& Stanovich, 2009; Spear-Swerling & Zibulsky, 2014). Cunningham et al. (2009) showed that English L1 teachers suggest spending only about 25% of the time on developing phonemic awareness, phonics and vocabulary. Spear-Swerling and Zibulsky (2014) found that many teachers allotted minimal time for phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling and vocabulary instruction. Most importantly, teachers’ content knowledge of linguistic components such as phonemes, graphemes, syllables, morphemes and semantics influences literacy instruction choices and has an impact on literacy achievements (Piasta, McDonald Conner, Fishman, & Morrison, 2009).

**EFL Literacy Instruction**

Although EFL literacy instruction is different from English L1 literacy instruction, EFL teachers’ content knowledge of basic English language constructs including phonemes, graphemes, syllables, and morphemes is as essential as it is for English L1 teachers (Kahn-Horwitz, 2016). EFL teachers may lack this knowledge, as shown in a study done in China, where EFL teachers were less able to explicitly demonstrate their content knowledge (Zhao, Joshi, Dixon, & Huang, 2016). English orthographic depth makes acquiring English reading and spelling particularly challenging for EFL students who spend much less time learning English than students acquiring L1 literacy (Kahn-Horwitz, 2016). Thus, it is essential for EFL teachers to obtain broad content knowledge of English language components including phonemes, graphemes, syllables and morphemes (Joshi et al., 2016; Kahn-Horwitz, 2016).

Similar to English L1 students, EFL students also benefit from the explicit instruction of the five pillars (August & Shanahan, 2006). In addition, comparable programs to those used in L1 have been shown to be effective, especially when some adaptations are made (August & Shanahan, 2006; August, McCardle, & Shanahan, 2014; Lipka & Siegel, 2012). Oral language instruction is critical and should be integrated into EFL literacy instruction (August & Shanahan, 2006). Instruction should be adapted to fit the students’ native language, explaining the similarities and differences, devoting time to teaching novel phonemes that do not exist in the students’ native tongue, and adding intensive vocabulary instruction (August et al., 2014). However, there are also linguistic skills related to literacy that are developed in L1, which transfer to the FL being taught (Saiegh-Haddad & Geva, 2010). For example, L1 phonemic awareness skills have been found to correlate with the parallel skills in FL as there is a transfer of skills (Geva & Wang, 2001). Thus, EFL students may not need the same depth of phonemic awareness instruction as L1 students do (Ediger, 2014).

In both L1 and EFL literacy development, students must be able to identify the orthographic patterns that make up words and store them efficiently in their memory (Kahn-Horwitz, Sparks, & Goldstein, 2011). This allows for direct access to the new lexicon, making phonics instruction an essential component in EFL literacy (Kahn-Horwitz, Shimron & Sparks, 2005). However, in a study done in Israel on single-word reading in English, eighth-grade EFL students performed at a level equivalent to third grade English L1 and eleventh graders read at a fourth-grade level. This indicates the need for more intensive teaching of English orthography throughout the elementary years (Zeltsman-Kulick, 2015).

Spelling is an essential component in English L1 literacy programs (Adams, 1990). According to the Integration of Multiple Patterns (IMP) theory, students benefit from explicit teaching of orthographic patterns as opposed to rote memorization of lists of words that do not have any common pattern (Treiman & Kessler, 2014). Spelling should be explicitly taught from the initial stages of EFL instruction, especially when the orthography of the students’ L1 is different from that of English (Hunt & Beglar, 2005; Kahn-Horwitz et al., 2011). However, in a study done in Israel that examined EFL teacher's content knowledge of the English orthography, teachers claimed that spelling is challenging for them and some felt that explicitly teaching spelling should not be a priority (Kahn-Horwitz, 2015). In a meta-analytic review done on studies about teaching spelling in English L1 settings, formal spelling instruction was found to be most effective from first through tenth grades. Spelling skills were shown to be retained over time and contributed to improving reading skills, as well as vocabulary skills (Geva, 2006; Graham &Santangelo, 2014). In a longitudinal study, both pre-service and in-service EFL teachers showed an improvement in their orthographic knowledge after participating in a course that taught English orthography (Kahn-Horwitz, 2016). However, this knowledge did not impact on pseudo word spelling accuracy, pointing to a need for further studies on how to improve EFL spelling in adults.

In a study done in Israel reading fluency was found to be the strongest predictor of reading comprehension for eleventh-grade EFL students, and a significant predictor for eighth graders (Zeltsman-Kulick, 2015). This indicates the importance of continuing reading fluency instruction throughout all years of EFL studies (Zeltsman-Kulick, 2015). Reading requires integration of both bottom-up and top-down skills from the beginning of EFL instruction and throughout high school (Ediger, 2014; Grabe, 2009a; Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2001). Bottom-up skills refer to the linguistic components critical for word recognition such as phonemes, graphemes, syllables, morphemes and lexical items, whereas top-down skills include applying knowledge, concepts, background and previous experience in constructing meaning as one navigates oneself through a text. This may present challenges for many EFL students because they may lack oral proficiency (Crosson & Lesaux, 2010; Grabe 2009b). L1 learners begin reading instruction after they have acquired extensive knowledge of oral language, which supports the development of reading skills (Olshtain, 2014; Rayner et al., 2001). For the EFL learner, instruction of oral language usually begins in parallel to or slightly before reading instruction, resulting in possible difficulties in the development of higher order skills (Crosson & Lesaux, 2010; Ediger, 2014; Grabe, 2009a).

Students benefit from explicit vocabulary instruction that includes deep knowledge of words and at least eight to ten encounters (and sometimes more) of hearing and using a new word are required for it to become part of their vocabulary (Ediger, 2014). However, time limitations may lead to students neglecting this process when learning a foreign language. Explicit teaching of spelling, word formation, collocations and additional meanings of vocabulary items is needed to reach reading proficiency (Hunt &Beglar, 2005). EFL literacy instruction should be thorough, offering high quality content knowledge of the five pillars, as well as oral language development (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Grammatical knowledge contributes to EFL literacy acquisition (Borg, 2003; Ur, 2011). One perspective argues that teaching grammar contributes to EFL language development when it is taught at an appropriate stage. Explicit grammar should be avoided at initial stages of literacy instruction, providing oral language activities in which acquisition takes place naturally and is taught after students reach a sufficient level of vocabulary (Ellis, 2001; 2006). However, Ur (2011) claims EFL students are more likely to benefit from systematic grammar teaching and practice throughout the school years.

This study, which was part of a larger study that also examined teacher trainers’ views and curriculums as reflected in textbooks (Fuchs, 2017), examined teachers’ reported practices in the first, second, third, fourth and fifth year of EFL literacy acquisition and development in elementary schools in Israel, and the extent to which it promoted theoretically based instruction. EFL literacy instruction topics have not been adequately researched and additional research is needed (Aronin & Spolsky, 2010; August & Shanahan, 2006; Borg, 2003; Ferguson & Donno, 2003; Joshi et al., 2016). The present study aims to better understand the gap between theory and practice by looking at the perceptions of teachers and their connection to theoretically based EFL instruction. The results of this study may shed light on changes that may need to occur in current EFL elementary school policies to improve literacy instruction. Specifically, we sought to answer this question: To what extent do EFL elementary school teachers in Israel promote theoretically based EFL literacy instruction? Based on findings from Bos, Mather, Dickson, Podhajski and Chard (2001) and Joshi, Binks, Hougen, Dahlgren, Oker-Dean and Smith (2009) our hypothesis is that teachers’ practices regarding EFL literacy instruction may not reflect theory as represented by research.

**Method**

**Participants**

One hundred and sixty-seven Israeli EFL elementary school teachers participated in this research. See Table 1 for a breakdown of teachers’ background characteristics.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

**Measures**

An anonymous, online questionnaire was developed for this study (see Appendix) according to guidelines for the construction of questionnaires in second language research (Dornyei, 2003). The questionnaire included the five pillars of literacy and EFL specific literacy topics. Questions were compiled for each section (Blaz, 2006; Carreker & Birsh, 2005; Ediger, 2014; Grabe, 2009c; Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), 2006; Ur, 2012). During the process of developing the questionnaire, a number of the leading EFL researchers, scholars, and policy makers in the English inspectorate of the Ministry of Education in Israel were consulted and amendments were made. The reliability of the questionnaire yielded a Cronbach Alpha value of .96.

**Procedure**

Elementary school EFL teachers in Israel were presented with the anonymous, online questionnaire, which they completed and submitted. The questionnaire included a short introduction explaining the study followed by questions and then asked teachers for a report of their practices. E-mails with a link to the questionnaire were sent to elementary school principals in Israel, who were then asked to forward it to all EFL teachers in their school. One hundred and sixty-seven elementary school teachers responded.

**Results**

Means and standard deviations were calculated for all measures. Pearson correlations were calculated between the variables. ANOVA repeated measures were used to examine the differences within each group and between the groups. Confirmatory factor analysis and Cronbach Alpha were done to determine which questions could be clustered across topics.

The grade in which EFL studies begin differs from school to school in Israel. Most schools, where the participants teach in, begin teaching in third grade (41.9%), 22.2% in first grade, 23.4% in second grade and only 9% begin EFL studies in fourth grade. However, the Israeli Ministry of Education recommends beginning EFL studies in fourth grade and hence funding for EFL teaching is allocated to schools starting in fourth grade. The number of recommended weekly hours of instruction is four hours in each of the grades (fourth, fifth and sixth) (State of Israel Ministry of Education, 2015). However, schools can change the target of the subject studies to up to 25% of their total allotted teaching hours.

Due to the variation in the starting grade of EFL instruction, the questionnaire was worded according to the year of EFL instruction (first year of EFL, second year of EFL, etc.). Teachers were asked to answer questions only for the grades that they were currently teaching and to consider the grade that their school begins EFL studies as the first year of EFL.

**The Five Pillars of Literacy Instruction**

The internal consistency of the respective phonemic awareness activities that teachers reported using yielded a Cronbach Alpha value of .91 for year 1, .87 for year 2, .87 for year 3, .88 for year 4, and .86 for year 5. Phonemic awareness activities were found to be done more frequently in first and second years and gradually decreased over following years (see Figure 1). These activities include identifying phonemes at the beginning or end of words, including oral rhyming activities, counting the number of phonemes in words, and phoneme deletion activities. ANOVA results showed significant differences between years *F*(4, 562) =21.81, *p*<.01. Scheffe post hoc tests showed differences between years (see Table 2).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Regarding phonics, teachers were asked how often they teach spelling rules and how often they provide phonic texts for reading practice. Spelling rules were reported to be taught more frequently in third and fourth years than in other years, although no significant differences between years were found. Phonic texts were provided at an average rate of once a week in all years (see Figure 2). ANOVA results regarding providing phonic texts showed significant differences between years *F*(4, 514) =5.11, *p*<.01. See table 2 for Scheffe post hoc differences between years.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

The internal consistency of the respective reading fluency activities that the teachers reported using yielded a Cronbach Alpha value of .85 for year 1, .84 for year 2, .75 for year 3, .66 for year 4, and .62 for year 5. Reading fluency activities include the students silently rereading the same text; reading the text in pairs or small groups; reading the text aloud to students; emphasizing intonation and punctuation while they have the text in front of them; or having the students read a text aloud to the teacher were found to be done at a frequency of about once a week in first and second years and then closer to twice a week throughout following years (see Figure 3). ANOVA results regarding providing reading fluency activities showed significant differences between years *F*(4, 548) =7.49, *p*<.01. Specifically, Scheffe post hoc tests showed significant differences between first and third, fourth and fifth years (see Table 2).

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Teachers were asked to report the number of vocabulary items they taught in a lesson and how many times they reviewed each item. The findings show that between four to five vocabulary items are taught in a lesson for first year while an average of six to seven items are taught in all other years except fifth year in which about eight to ten items are taught (see Figure 4). ANOVA results regarding number of vocabulary items taught per lesson showed significant differences between years *F*(4, 530) =42.28, *p*<.01. See table 2 for Scheffe post hoc tests results showing differences between almost all years. As for review of vocabulary items, this was reported to be done at an average of six to seven times throughout all years and no significant differences were found between years.

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

In addition, teachers were asked how often they teach commonly used function words, not directly connected to the currently taught unit. These words are taught less than once a week in first year and gradually increasing to about twice a week in fifth year (see Figure 5). ANOVA results regarding teaching of commonly used function words showed significant differences between years *F*(4, 533) =13.94, *p*<.01. See table 2 for Scheffe post hoc tests regarding differences between years.

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

The internal consistency of the respective reading comprehension related activities that teachers reported using yielded a Cronbach Alpha value of .81 for year 1, .88 for year 2, .87 for year 3, .83 for year 4, and .82 for year 5. Examples of reading comprehension activities include identifying the main idea of the text; reading texts silently and reading aloud to students and in each case having them answer comprehension questions; comparing information in the text to students’ personal experiences; making predictions as to what would happen next in the text; and identifying and describing the type of text they are reading. Reading comprehension activities in the first year were found to be performed less than once a week, whilst in the second and third years, reading comprehension activities were performed once a week; in the fourth and fifth years they were performed closer to twice a week (see Figure 6). ANOVA results regarding teaching reading comprehension showed significant differences between years *F*(4, 541) =28.54, *p*<.01. See Table 2 for Scheffe post hoc tests showing differences between almost all years.

[Insert Figure 6 about here]

**Additional EFL Literacy Instruction Topics**

In the first two years, grammar is taught less than once a week, in the third year once a week and in the fourth and fifth years closer to twice a week (see Figure 7). ANOVA results regarding the teaching of grammar showed significant differences between years *F*(4, 508) =38.53, *p*<.01. See Table 2 for Scheffe post hoc tests displaying differences between years.

[Insert Figure 7 about here]

In the first year 66.3% and in the second year 50.9% of the teachers reported that they do not teach grammar at all. Of those who do teach grammar in the first year, only 6.3% do so explicitly. As for the second year, more teachers reported teaching grammar explicitly (26.4%) than doing so implicitly (22.6%). In the third, fourth and fifth years, the following percentages of teachers reported that they teach grammar explicitly: 54.9%, 70.2%, and 84.9% respectively (see Table 2).

[Insert Table 3 about here]

During the first three years, listening activities are done at an average of twice a week, decreasing to about once a week in the next two years. ANOVA results regarding frequency of listening related activities showed significant differences between years *F*(4, 518) =4.80, *p*<.01. See Table 2 for Scheffe post hoc tests showing differences between second and fourth years, and second and fifth years. Speaking was reported by teachers as being practiced at an average of once a week throughout all years, and no significant differences were found between years (see Figure 8).

[Insert Figure 8 about here]

Dictations to assess spelling are done less than once a week in the first three years and then about once a week in the next two years (see Figure 9). ANOVA results regarding use of dictations to assess spelling showed significant differences between years *F*(4, 510) = 10.47, *p*<.01). See Table 2 for Scheffe post hoc tests showing differences between the first and third years, first and fourth years, and first and fifth years.

[Insert Figure 9 about here]

In addition, the types of dictations used to assess spelling were examined. Fifty-two per cent of the teachers reported that they dictate words that appear in the currently taught unit in the textbook, 4.2% dictate words that have one sound in common, 26.3% use both types of dictations, and 9% of the teachers reported that they do not use dictations (see Table 4).

[Insert Table 4 about here]

**Discussion**

This study examined the gap between research-based EFL literacy instruction and reported practices within EFL classrooms. A gap was found between theory and teachers’ practices implemented in literacy instruction, indicating that teachers may not be executing effective classroom EFL programs based on researched components. This gap was particularly evident for foundation level skills including phonemic awareness, phonics and spelling, and partially for grammar, reading comprehension, vocabulary and speaking. The current findings indicate that teachers’ reported practices within EFL classrooms are disconnected from research (Joshi et al., 2016; Kahn-Horwitz, 2015). This finding suggests implementing a new model of dissemination of knowledge in EFL teaching policy, as well as teacher education. Thus, this study has illuminated the gap between research based evidence and practice in the EFL literacy domain in Israel.

**The Five Pillars of Literacy Instruction**

Research has shown that EFL literacy instruction should be based on the five pillars of literacy (August & Shanahan, 2006; Ediger, 2014; National Reading Panel, 2000; Wolf &Katzir-Cohen, 2001). Phonemic awareness was reportedly practiced at an average frequency of twice a week in the first two years. This frequency is gradually reduced until fifth year in which phonemic awareness is practiced less than once a week. This may indicate that teachers are aware of the need to strengthen phonemic awareness and the ability to focus on and manipulate phonemes in spoken words in the foundation years of instruction (Brady & Moats, 1997; Cassidy et al., 2010). In the following years, time devoted to phonemic awareness development should be reduced. This is based on literature that suggests that skills acquired in students’ L1 will transfer during EFL acquisition (Ediger, 2014; Geva & Wang, 2001). Thus, too much class time devoted to phonemic awareness development is not necessary for EFL students and should be reduced to maximize time management (Cunningham et al., 2009).

Regarding the amount of teaching time devoted to phonics, results show that teachers reportedly provide phonic texts for reading practice at an average of once a week throughout all years. This finding raises questions concerning the extent to which teachers are aware of the importance of phonics instruction to achieve literacy as the frequent reading of phonic texts is especially crucial in the first years of instruction because it provides a strong foundation for reading and writing (Adams, 1990; Moats, 2000; Olshtain, 2014; Rayner et al., 2001; Shankweiler & Fowler, 2004). These texts serve as practice thereby cementing orthographic patterns, which should be explicitly taught for decoding and spelling purposes (Kahn-Horwitz, 2015; 2016; Olshtain, 2014). These orthographic patterns are then retained in memory, reinforcing their role as basic EFL literacy building blocks (Kahn-Horwitz et al., 2005; 2011). Zeltsman-Kulick (2015) reported that teachers do not seem to promote continuing phonics instruction throughout all elementary years. However, teaching English orthography is essential for acquiring reading since weak decoding skills have been shown to correlate with poor reading comprehension (Brady & Moats, 1997; Kahn-Horwitz, 2016; Shankweiler& Fowler, 2004).

One reason that phonic texts are not incorporated more frequently may be time management issues (Cunningham et al., 2009). For English L1, students need at least two and a half years for acquiring decoding skills, due to the deep orthography of the English language (Seymour et al., 2003). For EFL students this is a longer process due to the additional components needed, basic vocabulary and oral skills (August, & Shanahan, 2006), and the limited time allotted for teaching English (State of Israel Ministry of Education, 2015). Another reason for infrequent use of phonic texts may be due to a lack of access to these texts, which were found to be insufficiently incorporated in textbooks (Fuchs, 2017).

Teachers reported teaching spelling conventions approximately twice a week, in third and fourth years, as opposed to an average of once a week in other years. It seems that teachers lack awareness regarding the value of explicit instruction of spelling conventions from the initial year and throughout elementary years, to increase both spelling and reading performance (Graham & Santangelo, 2014). Furthermore, some Israeli EFL teachers feel that explicitly teaching spelling is not essential (Kahn-Horwitz, 2015). Teachers may have not acquired sufficient content knowledge of the English orthography, which may explain their reluctance to teach orthography (Kahn-Horwitz, 2016). Although spelling instruction contributes to the development of high lexical quality word knowledge, EFL teachers may find English spelling somewhat challenging and as a result may avoid teaching spelling rules (Hersch & Andrews, 2012; Kahn-Horwitz, 2015; Perfetti & Hart, 2002). Spelling dictations are done less than once a week in the first three years of instruction and subsequently about once a week. The most widely used type of dictation comprise of words appearing in the currently taught textbook unit and are not phonics based. Learning spelling conventions by studying how they apply across words, followed by dictations that are based on these conventions have shown to be more effective than rote memorization of random words; however, teachers may not be aware of this (Treiman & Kessler, 2014).

Teachers reported engaging in reading fluency activities at an average frequency of once a week in the first two years and then closer to twice a week after that. This seems to indicate that teachers promote the theory that reading fluency enhances reading comprehension (Crosson & Lesaux, 2010; Katzir et al., 2006; Quirk & Beem, 2012). However, even this frequency of reading fluency activities may not suffice. In a study done with EFL students in Israel, reading fluency was found to be the strongest predictor of reading comprehension for high school students, reflecting the importance of reading texts throughout the school years to gain automaticity and accuracy of the English language (Zeltsman-Kulick, 2015). Availability of reading fluency activities might also impact instruction. This is similar to previous research, which showed that textbooks using university L1 reading education courses do not adequately cover the five pillars (Joshi et al., 2009a). Therefore, EFL teachers may need to search for additional material outside of the textbooks in order to provide a sufficient reading fluency practice (Fuchs, 2017).

Teachers reported initially teaching four to five new vocabulary items in a lesson and increasing this number over the years to about eight to ten items. This frequency is reflected in many studies that have shown that an increase in vocabulary promotes reading comprehension (Brusnighan & Folk, 2012; Grabe, 2009a; Moats, 2000; Samuels, 2002; Schmitt et al., 2011). However, students will only be able to remember a word after exposure of at least eight to ten times (Ediger, 2014). Teachers reported reviewing vocabulary at an average of six to seven times, throughout all years, indicating that although they may be teaching a sufficient amount of vocabulary items, they may not be reviewing them often enough (Ediger, 2014).

A high lexical quality of word representation is needed for students to be able to comprehend the various meanings of words (Perfetti, 2007). Knowing the spelling of a word, in addition to meaning, and knowing how it is used with function words, contributes to higher lexical quality and comprehension (Ediger, 2014; Geva, 2006; Kim et al., 2011; Perfetti & Hart, 2002). Teachers reported that commonly used function words are taught less frequently than topic connected words, indicating that they may not be fully aware of the importance of teaching the various ways words are used (Ediger, 2014; Kim et al., 2011; Perfetti, 2007).

Reading comprehension requires bottom-up and top-down skills, taught from the beginning and throughout the school years (Ediger, 2014; Wolf &Katzir-Cohen, 2001). This study showed that during first year students engage in reading comprehension less than once a week, increasing gradually to twice a week in fourth and fifth years. However, students may struggle with reading comprehension because of insufficient decoding instruction. Allotting more time to developing basic decoding skills and oral vocabulary; and promoting the Simple View of Reading may be more effective in developing reading comprehension (Gough &Tunmer, 1986). However, limited teaching hours may result in a lack of time for sufficient literacy development activities (State of Israel, 2015). EFL teachers, like L1 teachers may be inappropriately allocating their teaching time (Cunningham et al., 2009; Spear-Swerling & Zibulsky, 2014). EFL teachers must be extremely knowledgeable in literacy instruction topics, as well as in time management (Kahn-Horwitz, 2016). Every minute in the EFL classroom should be exploited so that teaching time is dedicated to each of the five pillars and the additional literacy related components. Textbook design may assist EFL teachers with time allocation.

**Additional EFL Literacy Instruction Topics**

In the first two years, teachers recommended infrequent teaching of grammar and in the upper years, frequent grammar instruction. Very few teachers reported teaching grammar explicitly in first and second years, but most do so in subsequent years. The substantial amount of time devoted to teaching grammar in upper years may reflect the large amount of research on EFL grammar instruction (Borg, 2003; Ur, 2011). Ellis (2001, 2006) claims that grammar rules should not be taught at the initial stages of literacy instruction when providing a substantial amount of oral activities and teachers seem to take this position. However, teachers may not be aware of theory claiming that in Israel, where English is not spoken outside the classroom and teaching hours are limited, devoting class time to systematic grammar teaching from the initial years is likely to be effective (Ur, 2011).

Teachers reported integrating listening activities twice a week in the first three years, which decreases to once a week thereafter. Speaking was reported as being practiced at an average of once a week throughout all years. For EFL students, acquiring oral skills begins concurrently with or slightly before the beginning of reading instruction (Crosson & Lesaux, 2010; Ediger, 2014; Grabe, 2009a). Oral skills must be taught from the beginning and throughout EFL instruction (August & Shanahan, 2006; Ediger, 2014; Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2001). Findings in this study seem to indicate that teachers may be aware of theory regarding listening instruction but not speaking instruction.

**Conclusions**

This study was conducted to explore EFL literacy instruction in Israel, investigating the connection between research and reported practices that occur in classrooms. Findings support research that claims that literacy instruction in elementary schools may not be based on theoretical models (Bos et al., 2001; Moats, 2014; Vellutino & Scanlon, 2001) and results indicated that EFL teachers seem to have limited awareness of research based literacy instruction models, resulting in reduced productivity of literacy programs in classrooms. Thus, support for the hypothesis of this study was proved and the findings suggest that teachers may not sufficiently promote theoretically based literacy instruction (Bos et al., 2001; Joshi et al., 2009).

In terms of practical implications, acquisition of more comprehensive knowledge of theory based EFL literacy instructional components is advised for teachers (Joshi, et al., 2016; Kahn-Horwitz, 2016; Moats, 2014; Zhao et al., 2016). This may contribute to the adequacy of literacy instruction, resulting in improved student achievements in learning English. Furthermore, regarding time management difficulties, which is due to the limited number of hours allocated to EFL studies in Israel, it is recommended that increasing the hours allocated to EFL studies should be addressed by educational policy makers (Cunningham et al., 2009; State of Israel Ministry of Education, 2015). Since at least two and a half years are needed to reach acquisition of decoding for L1 students (Seymour et al., 2003), it seems that the amount of EFL teaching hours in Israel may not be realistic for acquiring literacy skills.

Despite the contribution of this study, it has limitations. One limitation was that the number of teacher participants was fewer than anticipated. Out of the several thousand EFL elementary school teachers that were approached, a relatively small percentage completed the questionnaire, thereby limiting the generalizability of the conclusions. Due to technical difficulties in directly contacting the teachers, many of them may not have received the request to participate. The length of the questionnaires may have been a deterring factor. This may have caused some participants to abandon the questionnaire before it was submitted. Finally, had the questionnaire been formulated in the respondents’ L1 (Hebrew or Arabic), there may have been more respondents.

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Table 1

*Participant Descriptive Information*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Number | Percentage |
| *Gender*:  Female | 155 | 94.5 |
| Male | 9 | 5.5 |
| *Teaching Diploma:*  Holds a teaching diploma | 163 | 98.8 |
| From a college | 125 | 76.7 |
| From a university | 38 | 23.3 |
| For teaching English | 139 | 85.8 |
| Holds an academic degree | 159 | 97.5 |
| *Academic degree:*  B.Ed. | 60 | 38.5 |
| B.A. | 45 | 28.8 |
| M.Ed. | 18 | 11.5 |
| M.A. | 31 | 19.9 |
| Ph.D. | 2 | 1.3 |
| From a college | 86 | 55.1 |
| From a university | 70 | 44.9 |
| Participated in an in-service course for EFL teachers within the last three years | 111 | 66.9 |
| *School Sector:*  Jewish Secular | 108 | 65 |
| Jewish Religious | 38 | 22.9 |
| Arab, Druze, Bedouin | 20 | 12 |
| *Type of school:*  Mainstream | 154 | 95.7 |
| Special Education | 7 | 4.3 |
|  |  |  |

*Note.* Some teachers did not supply some descriptive information thus the sum of some variables is not one hundred and sixty-seven.

Table 2

*Scheffe post hoc comparisons between years (1,2, 3, 4 and 5) and reported teaching of the respective EFL linguistic variables with probability values*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Phonemic awareness** | | | | | | | | |
|  | | YEAR2 | | YEAR3 | | YEAR4 | | YEAR5 |
| YEAR1 | |  | |  | | <.01 | | <.01 |
| YEAR2 | |  | |  | | <.01 | | <.01 |
| YEAR3 | |  | |  | | <.01 | | <.01 |
| YEAR4 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| YEAR5 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| **Phonics** | | | | | | | | |
|  | | YEAR2 | | YEAR3 | | YEAR4 | | YEAR5 |
| YEAR1 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| YEAR2 | |  | |  | |  | | <.05 |
| YEAR3 | |  | |  | |  | | <.05 |
| YEAR4 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| YEAR5 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| **Reading Fluency** | | | | | | | | |
|  | | YEAR2 | | YEAR3 | | YEAR4 | | YEAR5 |
| YEAR1 | |  | | <.01 | | <.01 | | <.01 |
| YEAR2 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| YEAR3 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| YEAR4 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| YEAR5 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| **Vocabulary** | |
|  | | YEAR2 | | YEAR3 | | YEAR4 | | YEAR5 |
| YEAR1 | | <.01 | | <.01 | | <.01 | | <.01 |
| YEAR2 | |  | | <.05 | | <.01 | | <.01 |
| YEAR3 | |  | |  | |  | | <.01 |
| YEAR4 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| YEAR5 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| **Teaching function words** | | | | | | | | |
|  | | YEAR2 | | YEAR3 | | YEAR4 | | YEAR5 |
| YEAR1 | |  | | <.01 | | <.01 | | <.01 |
| YEAR2 | |  | |  | | <.01 | | <.01 |
| YEAR3 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| YEAR4 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| YEAR5 | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| **Reading Comprehension** | | | | | | | | |
|  | YEAR2 | | YEAR3 | | YEAR4 | | YEAR5 | |
| YEAR1 | <.05 | | <.05 | | <.01 | | <.01 | |
| YEAR2 |  | | <.05 | | <.01 | | <.01 | |
| YEAR3 | | | | | | | | |
| YEAR4 | | | | | | | | |
| YEAR5 | | | | | | | | |
| **Grammar** | | | | | | | | |
|  | YEAR2 | | YEAR3 | | YEAR4 | | YEAR5 | |
| YEAR1 | <.05 | | <.01 | | <.01 | | <.01 | |
| YEAR2 |  | |  | | <.01 | | <.01 | |
| YEAR3 |  | |  | |  | |  | |
| YEAR4 |  | |  | |  | |  | |
| YEAR5 |  | |  | |  | |  | |

**Listening activities**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | YEAR2 | YEAR3 | YEAR4 | YEAR5 |
| YEAR1 |  |  |  |  |
| YEAR2 |  |  | <.05 | <.05 |
| YEAR3 |  |  |  |  |
| YEAR4 |  |  |  |  |
| YEAR5 |  |  |  |  |
| **Spelling Dictation** | | | | |
|  | YEAR2 | YEAR3 | YEAR4 | YEAR5 |
| YEAR1 |  | <.01 | <.01 | <.01 |
| YEAR2 |  |  |  |  |
| YEAR3 |  |  |  |  |
| YEAR4 |  |  |  |  |
| YEAR5 |  |  |  |  |

Table 3

*Explicit teaching of grammar (as percentages)*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | Explicit | Implicit | Doesn't Teach |
| First year | 6.3 | 27.4 | 66.3 |
| Second year | 26.4 | 22.6 | 50.9 |
| Third year | 54.9 | 23.8 | 21.3 |
| Fourth year | 70.2 | 21.9 | 7.9 |
| Fifth year | 84.9 | 10.8 | 4.3 |

Table 4

*Types of dictations (as percentages)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Type | Reported |
| Don't use dictations | 9 |
| Words in currently taught unit | 52.1 |
| Words with one sound in common | 4.2 |
| Both types | 26.3 |
| Missing | 8.4 |

Note: Scale for all figures (unless stated otherwise): "How often do you teach…": not at all=1, less than once a week=2, once a week=3, twice a week=4, three times a week=5, every lesson=6

Figure 1. Frequency of Teaching Phonemic Awareness

Figure 2. Frequency of Teaching Spelling Rules and Phonics

Figure 3. Frequency of Training Reading Fluency

Figure 4. Vocabulary Items Taught and Reviewed

"How many vocabulary items do you teach in a lesson?": none=1, less than 4=2, 4-5=3, 6-7=4, 8-10=5, more than 10=6

"How many times do you review the same vocabulary item?": none=1, less than 4=2, 4-5=3, 6-7=4, 8-10=5, more than 10=6

Figure 5. Frequency of Teaching Vocabulary Function Words

Figure 6. Frequency of Facilitating EFL Reading Comprehension per Week

Figure 7. Frequency of Teaching Grammar

Figure 8. Frequency of Listening and Speaking Activities per Week

Figure 9. Frequency of Dictations per Week

*Appendix*

Teachers' Questionnaire

Options for each year (unless otherwise stated): not at all / less than once a week / once a week / twice a week / three times a week / every lesson

*Section I*

Part A

1. How often do you usually include activities such as identifying sounds at the beginning or end of words in your lessons in each grade (for example: the teacher asks "What sound do you hear at the beginning of the word 'sit'"? The pupils answer: /s/)?

2. How often do you usually include oral rhyming activities in your lessons (for example: the teacher says "Which word rhymes with the word 'cat'; 'bat' or 'car'". The pupils answer: 'bat')?

3. How often do you usually include activities that deal with counting the number of sounds in words in your lessons (for example: the teacher shows a picture of a fish and pronounces the word "fish" asking how many sounds do they hear. The pupils answer: 3 sounds)?

4. How often do you usually include activities such as deleting or switching one sound in a word in your lessons (for example: the teacher asks the pupils to say the word "back" without the /b/ sound)?

Part B

1. In which years do you teach the sounds of the letters?

2. In which years do you teach the names of the letters?

3. In what order do you teach the sounds of the letters? According to the sequence that appears in the textbook / according to the alphabetic sequence / according to letter frequency / other

4. In which years do you teach the sounds of the letter combinations (two or more letters that form one sound, such as: sh, ow, ea)?

5. How often do you usually teach spelling rules in your lessons for example "silent/magic e" (e.g. cake) "soft c" (e.g. city – the letter c sounds like /s/)?

6. How often do you usually provide your pupils with phonic texts for reading practice (texts that can be read by sounding out each letter or letter combination that you have already taught, with no or very few irregular words)?

Part C

1. How often do you usually ask your pupils to silently reread the same text (3 times or more)?

2. How often do you usually read a text aloud to your pupils, when they have a copy of the text in front of them to follow your reading, while emphasizing punctuation and intonation?

3. How often do you usually ask your pupils to read aloud in pairs or small groups?

4. How often do you usually ask a pupil to read a paragraph aloud to you so that you can evaluate his word decoding and fluency?

Part D

1. How many new vocabulary items do you usually teach in a lesson in each of your classes?

Options for each year: none / less than 4 / 4-5 / 6-7 / 8-10 / more than 10

2. Which type of vocabulary items do you usually teach? single words / chunks of language (two or more words that form meaning together) / chunks of language within sentences

3. How often do you teach commonly used words that are not directly connected to the topic that you are teaching, such as: only, just, but?

4. How many times do you review the same vocabulary item?

Options for each year: none / less than 4 / 4-5 / 6-7 / 8-10 / more than 10

Part E

1. How often do you ask your pupils to identify the main idea of a text they have read?

2. How often do you have your pupils read simple texts silently, without hearing you reading aloud, and then demonstrate understanding by answering questions orally or in writing?

3. How often do you read aloud to your pupils and then ask them to demonstrate understanding by answering questions orally or in writing?

4. How often do you ask your pupils to compare what they have read to their own personal experiences or to other things that they have read?

5. How often do you ask your pupils to make predictions about what will happen next in the text they are reading?

6. How often do you ask your pupils to identify and describe the type of text they have read?

*Section II*

Part A

1. How often do you usually teach grammar in your lessons (examples: word order in sentences; prefixes and suffixes; letter/s added to nouns, verbs and adjectives for different grammatical forms)?

2. Do you usually teach grammar explicitly (explaining the grammar rule and providing practice)?

Options for each year: yes / no / I don't teach grammar in this grade

Part B

1. How often do you usually include listening activities in your lessons (for example: having the pupils draw a picture according to a description that they listen to)?

2. How often do you usually include speaking activities in your lessons (for example: having the pupils gather information by walking around and asking their classmates questions)?

Part C

1. How often do you usually include dictations to assess spelling?

2. If you include dictations in your lessons, which type of dictations do you usually use? I don't use dictations /vocabulary words that appear in the unit that you are currently teaching from your textbook / words that have one sound in common / irregular words / other (please specify