JORDANIAN LITERACY EDUCATION: SHOULD WHOLE LANGUAGE BE IMPLEMENTED?

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Abstract

This paper aims to clarify and discuss the extent to which the whole-language approach might be implemented to literacy education in Jordan. The researcher describes what the whole-language approach is all about, what whole language opponents' view and what proponents are trying to say. Therefore, the researcher introduces and discusses whole-language principles and activities. Then, the requirements for implementing the whole-language approach in Jordan are clarified.

Keywords: Whole Language Approach, Teaching Literacy, literacy in Jordan, Literacy Education

Background

The Ministry of Education has the main responsibility for education in Jordan, and oversees planning, policy formation, quality control, and follow-up. The directorates (regional education offices) are responsible for implementation. The educational system has three levels: primary (kindergarten to tenth grade), secondary (eleventh and twelfth grades), and higher education (community colleges and universities) (Taal, 1989).

The development of education and instruction in Jordan is one of the country's most pressing tasks. The Ministry of Education is currently paying particular attention to developing and enhancing language programs. To this end, the Ministry established directorates to manage Public and private schools at the local level; the Ministry itself is responsible for planning, curriculum design, textbook selection, and financial monitoring. The school curriculum is uniform throughout the country, and is set by the Higher Committee for Curriculum and School Textbooks, which also selects and approves all reading materials used in the classroom (Ministry of Education, 2005).

In Jordan, literacy instruction is based on the combined method, using the sentence and the word. As soon as pupils are familiar with a

number of common sentences they begin to analyze them into their simpler components. After pupils understand the letter-sound correspondence they can begin to rebuild words from letters and sentences from words.

In the past, Jordanians used the alphabetical method to teach and learn language, in the belief that the ability to read fluently depended on how well the child could memorize and produce the Arabic letters. Arabic is written with its own alphabet; in addition to the twenty-nine consonantal letters there are diacritical signs to represent vowels, as well as subject, object, and other grammatical units.

The main function of primary school in Jordan is to provide pupils with the experiences, knowledge, and skills necessary for their physical, mental, emotional, and social development. Since Arabic is the official language in Jordan, the teaching of this language plays an important role in primary-level instruction; the goal here is to enable pupils to participate effectively in the reading activities customary in literate society and for the student to express ideas, both orally and in writing, with a reasonable degree of clarity and correctness. To achieve these objectives the education ministry in Jordan dictates that most classroom time in grades one through four be devoted to teaching Arabic. Arabic is also used in teaching other subjects. By the time he or she graduates from primary school, the student is expected to be able to read, write, and express ideas verbally (Ministry of Education, 2005).

At the secondary level in Jordan the most important objectives are improving students' skills for the effective use of language and the reading and appreciation of classical and modern Arabic literature. Arabic textbooks at this level include sections on reading, writing, literature, Grammar, literary criticism and rhetoric, and prosody.

Previously disappointing findings from studies conducted in the literacy field in Jordan (Alhaddad, 2005, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2009) have led to calls to improve the literacy instruction in Jordanian schools. The way in which literacy is taught is believed to be a main factor for that. Although the current Arabic Language Curriculum and its General and Specific Outcomes for the Basic and Secondary Stages (2005) is based upon the communicative approach to language teaching, the practice of teaching Arabic language seems to be carried out in the traditional way. Therefore, literacy instruction in Jordanian classrooms should be much more effective. Following sections are intended to give the reader a clear idea about one of the most - disputable approaches to teaching literacy, that is the whole language, and to discuss possibilities for implementing whole language to literacy education in Jordan.

Research Questions

The aim of this study is to analyze and introduce the whole language approach to improve the way of literacy education in Jordan through answering the following questions:

1. What the whole language is?
2. What views do opponents and proponents of the whole language have?
3. What Jordanian educators can do to implement the whole-language in Jordan?

Significance of the study

This study encourages students and teachers to reflect on their own literacy practices. More specifically, it is expected to help teachers of Arabic reflect on their methods of teaching literacy so that they help their students to learn more effectively. Supervisors and parents might also benefit from this study. The Ministry of Education may reconsider the in-service training programs with regard to the literacy education.

Method

Since this study is theoretical, the literature review technique, which is a qualitative technique, was used to do this study. Then the data were interpreted to find answers for the questions of the study.

Results

What the Whole Language Is

Whole language proposes that children learn from the whole to parts. Reading and writing are considered social events, and discussion is encouraged. Students as well as the teacher read, write, talk, and listen in authentic situations. Quality children's literatures holds a prominent place, as students and teachers read it and make connections for discussion writing, further reading, and listening purposes (Lantolf, 2006). A whole language classroom is a print-rich environment. Further, opportunities for authentic writing on self-selected topics, chances to share strategies and expertise with peers, and freedom to experiment without fear of failure are dominant themes. A whole language philosophy incorporates a real-life perspective, emphasizing the whole as opposed to the bits and pieces of language and life studied in a more traditional approach (Goodman, 1996). Teachers are co-learners, modeling and exploring with children as both search for answers and questions of interest to them. In the whole language approach, the student is at the center of constructing meaning (Cushenbery, 1989).

Whole language is not easily and briefly defined. It is not an activity or simply a method or approach. Whole language is a philosophy about how language learning happens and a set of beliefs that guide classroom

practice (Goodman, 1986).

Whole language is a theory about teaching and learning in an environment that truly respects the individual learner and expects active participation by both the teacher and the students. Whole language teachers believe that language is learned naturally as it is used in meaningful contexts. Language is learned by actually using it, not by practicing its separate parts. "Natural" is a key word among many proponents of the whole-language approach. They believe literacy is acquired in the same way that oral language is acquired: learning to read is the same as learning to speak. Whole language teachers believe that schools should complement the way children are learning language effectively and naturally at home. They value the language and life experiences that children bring to school with them. They focus on the learner's strengths and watch for growth in their literacy development (Bird, 2011). Whole language teachers believe that learning is a social experience, and that all children can learn. Teachers should also perceive themselves as learners. Whole language is defined by a set of beliefs that shape practice in the classroom (Burk & Melton-Pages, 1991).

Language is intact and whole. In many non-whole language instructional settings, language is broken into small segments in the belief that students can master its isolated parts more easily, and that teachers can monitor learners' acquisition of it. Whole language is a point of view that language is inherently integrative, not disintegrative. It follows that language is learned and should be taught with all its systems intact. Situational context, semantics, syntax, and phonics must not be torn apart if language is to be learned naturally. Because language develops within a culture, the student's culture must be recognized in the understanding of the language itself and in how language is learned (Watson, 1989).

Language is the vehicle for learning. Children need to think, read, talk, and write so they can improve their fluency and flexibility with language. As children develop ownership of words and ideas, they realize that what they read has meaning and has value for learning. Students become aware that they have the power to write and to give permanence to their thoughts. Children learn to use written language to increase their knowledge, and to form and voice their own opinions. Students learn to work together cooperatively, and influence each other's skills that are integral to a democratic community. However, more significantly, students learn that they are valued as individuals (Burchby, 1988; Hinkel, 2006).

Whole language delivery for reading instruction is based on readers constructing meaning during reading, and using their schema of prior experience and knowledge to make sense of the text. The classroom

atmosphere encourages children to use language in a variety of situations for their own purposes. There is no sequence of skills; rather, all language is used as a whole (Lantolf, 2006). The teacher provides guidance, supporting the students as they take control of their own learning process. Reading, writing, speaking and listening, which comprise a whole language context, cannot be separated into piece and parcel. Whole language is an attitude of mind which provides a shape for the classroom (Rich, 1985).

In a whole language perspective, it is not just oral language that counts as language. Oral language, written language, sign language, each of these is a system of linguistic conventions for creating meanings. That means none is "the basis" for the other; none is a secondary representation of the other. It means that whatever is language is learned like language and acts like language.

The whole language view is that reading (or writing or oral language) is something that cannot be segmented into component parts and still remain reading, that any "component sub- skill" of reading (e. g., decoding), used when one is not actually reading (e.g., when one is doing exercises in decoding), works differently than it does when someone is really reading (Edelsky et al., 1991).

It is important to emphasize that whole language is a philosophy, a belief system about the nature of learning and how it can be fostered in classrooms and schools. It is not an approach per se, though of course some kinds of activities can reasonably be characterized as whole language because they are consonant with this philosophy, while others are logically rejected by the philosophy. There is no single set of activities, much less a prepackaged program, that can be said to define whole language (Altwerger et al., 1987; Weaver, 1990).

Since language is acquired naturally by the child through being immersed in a language-rich environment, so the child can learn to read naturally by being immersed in a print-rich environment. Following this logic, the language a child encounter in print should be as "whole" as the language he or she encounters in the natural environment, and should not be divided into sounds, syllables, or words (Goodman, 1996; Vellutino, 1991).

Methods of learning and teaching are based on a number of fundamental assumptions. Teachers working from these assumptions try to create open learning environments (Newman and Church, 1991). Current whole-language views of effective reading instruction involve the simultaneous integration of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visual expression within a context that is meaningful to the reader. A basic premise of whole-language philosophy is that reading must be seen as a part of children's general language development and not as a discrete skill isolated from listening, speaking, and writing (Anderson et al., 1985). The

whole-language approach encourages children to learn reading in the same way they have already learned speaking. That means that child should deal with whole words, sentences, and stories, using newspapers, magazines, child-selected books, and writings by other children. Whole language is thus student-centered rather than teacher-centered (Clark, 1995).

In whole-language classrooms pupils read favorite rhymes, songs, sentences, and stanzas; no words are introduced in "unnatural" contexts. Gradually, with their teachers' assistance, pupils develop the phonics knowledge they need in order to read. Whole-language instruction moves from whole to part, and usually does so many times during a typical day's activities (Weaver, 1991).

In the whole-language view, the curriculum must be language-oriented and student-centered in order to be effective. Curricula should focus not on the content but on the learner. Whole-language advocates believe that content can only be comprehended when learners are actively involved and interested in learning, sharing with their teachers the authority to decide what will be learned, and relate the materials they are learning to what they already know from personal experience. The whole-language curriculum attempts to create a life-like classroom and to extend learning beyond it into the community and the home (Goodman, 1989).

In the whole-language classroom the student is the center of curriculum planning; no materials are introduced until they have been validated by the learner's interests and needs; topics are chosen after the student's world has been brought into the classroom. Teachers come to know their students' lives and interests through discussion; they can then cooperate with their students to design a curriculum that is meaningful, appropriate, and applicable (Watson; 1989).

Whole language is a reaction against the traditional scenario of reading instruction, in which manuals are used to control the course of learning in everything but comprehension monitoring, and in which teachers rely on decontextualized basal readers and mind-numbing practice workbooks (Durkin, 1981). The curriculum used in the whole-language program is unique to each teacher because it is determined by the needs of the students and whatever difficulties they have in oral and written expression. In addition, whole-language proponents insist that the curriculum should focus on a wide range of literature rather than on isolated skill instruction. To bring this about, Goodman (1986) suggests centering the curriculum on a purpose for reading. That is, the curriculum is organized around topics, units, or themes that can be integrated into all of the content areas in which reading can be used, such as science, social studies, or literature. In addition, skills programs, workbooks, and other isolated teaching practices are not used in a whole-language program.

Appropriate materials for reading instruction are those students want to read or write. In whole-language philosophy, literacy develops "from whole to part, from vague to precise, from highly concrete and contextualized to more abstract, from familiar contexts to unfamiliar" (Goodman, 1986, p. 39). Comprehension, from the whole-language view, then flows from the reader's previous knowledge and background information (Goodman and Goodman, 1981).

Whole-language teachers are classroom researchers, participants; learners, resource persons, and listeners. The whole-language approach requires teachers who are activists and advocates on behalf of themselves, their students, and their curricula (Watson, 1989). Teachers try to build a sense of community in the classroom; students have a right to feel comfortable and safe from physical, mental, or social abuse (Goodman, 1992).

The environment of the whole-language classroom is a democratic one in which teachers collaborate with their students to set suitable goals. Whole-language teachers plan learning experiences based on the background and experience of the learners (Goodman, 1989). Learning in whole-language programs is active and intelligent, both personal and social. Learning is a series of transactions between the student and the world (Goodman, 1992).

Whole language: Opponents' View

There are three main drawbacks to the whole-language approach from its opponents' point of view. The first is that reading in this approach is a "psycholinguistic guessing game." That is: in whole-language philosophy accuracy in reading is not considered important. This attitude shortchanges students, confronting them with difficulties every time they encounter new words. Accurate word recognition and decoding are improved when students know that words have sounds and structures. Texts yield more information if their individual words are rightly understood. A second drawback is the almost exclusive reliance on story. As a practical matter, students must learn to read for content in science, history, and math, not just narrative texts in language class. A third drawback is the focus on literary elements as opposed to teaching skills (Vail, 1991).

Broadly speaking, the traditional method is what is now labeled "phonics." Phonics proponents support this approach in opposition to the whole-language movement in American schools. The modern phonics method is called intensive, systematic phonics. It teaches the skills and logic children need to understand the English spelling system (Armstrong, 1989).

There is abundant evidence that language comprehension processes become fully operative in reading only when a certain degree of fluency in

word identification has been achieved. Comprehension has been found to be deficient when word identification is slow. Undoubtedly this occurs because of the fact that when word recognition processes demand too much cognitive capacity, fewer cognitive resources are left to allocate to comprehension (Vellutino, 1991).

Reading for meaning is greatly hindered when children have trouble with word recognition. Trying to read without the cognitive resources to understand the meaning of the text is not a rewarding experience, and can lead to less involvement in reading-related activates (Chall et al., 1990).

Phonics proponents assert that the damage that results when children are not taught phonics usually lies hidden until they leave the controlled vocabulary of the basal readers for more difficult books where guessing or memorizing new words does not work (Armstrong, 1989). Phonics advocates also support a return to a traditional curriculum built around teaching children to sound out words first. Such a curriculum uses flashcards, workbooks, and repetitive drilling to establish basics and to highlight the parts of reading, before students work up to the whole (Clark, 1995). Additionally, children who quickly develop efficient decoding processes find reading enjoyable because they can concentrate on the meaning of the text. They read in school and reading becomes a self-chosen activity (Stanovich, 1994).

Perfetti and Hogaboam (1975) found that those who perform poorly on tests that evaluate the ability to identify words out of context tend to perform less adequately on reading comprehension tests than those who perform well on tests evaluating out-of-context word identification; this relationship has been found in both children and adults.

Whole Language: Proponents' View

In response, whole-language proponents say that, it is common to assume that word identification proceeds comprehension, whereas it is clear that comprehension works the other way around: because if we getting the meaning of the whole, we can then grasp the meanings of the individual words. The words have meaning only as they transact with one another in sentence, text, social, and situational context. When we use single words like ' Eye ', ' Spring ', or ' Rain ' these words are spoken in a situational context that makes our meaning clear. Thus, the process of literacy is to a considerable degree whole to part, top to bottom, deep to surface, inside out. Whole Language educators think not about teaching reading but about guiding and supporting students in developing as independent readers, writers, and learners (Weaver, 1994).

Newman and Church (1991) discuss nineteen ways in which the whole-language can be misinterpreted. They cite as one example the view

that teachers in whole-language programs do not teach phonics. Newman and Church point out that of course no one can read without accounting for the graphophonic cues of written language. But the whole-language approach encourages using other cues to determine the meaning and structure of a text passage, such as pictorial cues and previous experience about the topic. Whole-language teachers teach phonics without isolating phonics from actual reading and writing. Newman and Church also cite as a common misconception the notion that teachers in whole-language classrooms do not teach spelling or grammar. The reality, however, is that learning to read and write begins with engaging in reading and writing experiences that have strong personal and shared meaning rather than with instruction in isolated skills. As children use language they learn about it, discovering much on their own. Thus, the concepts of spelling and grammar evolve out of the language-learning experience, rather than being taught as separate topics.

In addition, the standardized tests measure low-level skills only. Proponents of the whole language say that determining which method (whole-language vs. phonics) can produce the highest scores on standardized tests in the primary grades should not be the central issue, since such tests typically place a higher premium on word-identification skills than on comprehension of connected text. They say that a heavy emphasis on phonics and other low-level skills may sabotage our intention to help students become sufficiently literate to participate in our society. Students who have trouble with phonics skills are viewed as incompetent at reading, and this affects their self-esteem and desire to read. Research, then, must look not just at test scores but at wither or not students are developing the attitudes and habits of independent, self-motivated, lifelong readers and writers (Weaver, 1991).

Implementation

The previous discussions illustrate the usefulness of the whole-language approach; it would appear to be suitable for Jordanian literacy education. To come up with the principles of the whole language, Jordanian educators should change the way they deal with literacy instruction, for example, the Jordanian Ministry of Education should not have sole responsibility for the curriculum, textbooks, and other materials used in the classroom in order to pave the way for teachers to implement the whole language activities. Also, the study of the Arabic language is divided, from the fourth grade onward, into a grammar section, a reading section, literary criticism, and rhetoric. Grammar is not taught in the reading class, nor writing in the criticism class. This situation does not lend itself to the whole language approach. Moreover, the Ministry sets deadlines under which

textbooks must be completed at the end of each semester, and the textbooks are quite long. The whole-language philosophy is not compatible with this method of teaching language. Then, these traditional ways for dealing with teaching literacy in Jordan should be changed.

In addition, Jordanian authors should be encouraged to publish stories for children; this kind of writing is new to them, as it is to Arabic authors in general. If Jordanian authors write enough stories for Jordanian children, then, they can live in a print-rich environment which is required for whole language activities.

What about democracy in the classroom? Jordanian teachers and students must live in a democratic environment which is natural to every human being. "Natural," after all, is the entire point behind whole-language philosophy. Freedom, like the air, must be available to everybody, regardless of age or their status as student vs. teacher.

Finally, Jordan has many teachers who did not graduate from the teachers' colleges. These teachers do not have the training necessary to implement the whole language approach. Many of them need more advanced training in the educational sciences.

Conclusion

The whole language approach should be the center of the Arabic curricula and classroom learning - teaching processes to develop the autonomy of the students. Higher thinking skills can be improved through whole language approach.

The whole language enhances cooperation among students and decreases selfishness. This is necessary to create a new environment for teaching literacy, and to start building a new life in the classroom based on workshops. Besides, in-service teachers should be well-trained to implement whole language approach to literacy instruction.

In addition, Jordanians should start to improve the way literacy is taught in Jordan based on what the research reveals. First of all, changing the mentality and attitude of teachers is very important for success in this effort. However, I would like to recommend the following changes:

- The functions of school teachers in the curriculum development process should be clarified, and ways to utilize their expertise in curriculum development and implementation should be identified.
- Teaching of students should focus on the execution of development projects.
- More attention should be given to the social aspects of Arabic programs.
- More emphasis should be placed on contemporary Arabic literature, such as the short story, novel, and drama.
- Supervisors of Arabic should encourage teachers to implement the

principles and activities of the whole language approach inside the classrooms.

- Teachers should conduct scientific research to improve the teaching of the Arabic language. There is a lack of teacher research in this field.

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