

Learning to Read with the Whole Language Approach: The Teacher's View

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Received: January 30, 2014 Accepted: March 2, 2014 Online Published: April 14, 2014

doi:10.5539/elt.v7n5p71 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v7n5p71>

Abstract

This project explores the understanding of early year's teachers regarding whole language approach and its implementation. A total of 200 questionnaires were delivered to teachers at nurseries and kindergartens in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. 169 questionnaires were completed and analysed. The findings shows that an overwhelming majority of the participants know idea of whole language approach and know its value and relevance to improving early year literacy teaching. The result showed that teachers' perspective about literacy teaching clustered primarily in the interactive approach which indicated that most teachers prefer neither whole language approach nor skills based approach.

Keywords: whole language, primary education, literacy

1. Introduction

The whole language approach has in recent times been a very popular and important trend in early childhood education. Researchers of the whole language philosophy hold the view that language should not be broken down into letters or combinations of letters and ordinary understandable message decoded. Instead, they believe that language is a complete system of making meaning, with words functioned in relation to each other in context. Many nurseries even put the whole language approach as one of the important elements in their curriculum design in order to attract more parents when they were looking for early childhood education programmes for their children (Liu, 2006). This study seeks to offer a platform for teachers, educators and researchers to go beyond the superficial realization of the difficulties of putting change into practice. The researcher felt a passionate desire to pursue a study with the primary research purpose of investigating the implementation of the changes to nursery literacy learning and teaching practices. What difficulties had they encountered in terms of integrating the whole language approach into their programmes? Where were the difficulties for teachers in making these changes to practice in nursery classrooms? If why and how do they emerge? These questions represent the key foci of the current study. How to approach these questions is central to the organization and scope of the research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Whole Language Approach

The whole language proponents claimed that language should not be broken down into letters and combinations of letters and decoded (Stahl & Miller, 1989). Instead, they believe that language is a complete system of making meaning, with words functioning in relation to each other in context (Moats, 2007). Froses (1991, p. 2) defines "whole language" as a:

child centered, literature-based approach to language teaching that immerses students in real communication situations whenever possible.

It also suggests that language is learned from whole to part. Learners are presented with whole and natural language (Bergeron, 1990). The philosophy of whole language approach is complex and draws on fields such as education, linguistics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology (Jeynes & Littell, 2000; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000). As Adams claims, whole language movement:

... should be a core component of a long overdue and highly constructive revolution. It should be about restoring

the confidence and authority of teachers. It should be an affirmation that education can only be as effective as it is sensitive to the strengths, interests and needs of its students. (Adams, 1991, p. 41)

P. Stanovich and K. Stanovich (1999, p. 29) echo this sentiment:

The way now seems clear for the whole language advocates to reconstitute their position in a scientifically respectable way. They could retain most of their broad socio-educational goal (teacher empowerment, equal opportunity for all learners, engaged learning etc)

2.2 Top-Down Reading Approach to Whole Language Approach

The whole language approach is based on constructivist learning theory and is often considered a *top-down model*. The concept of whole language is strongly associated with the work of Goodman (1967). Goodman's conceptualization departs from an older perspective on reading acquisition in that it sees the process of learning to read as behavioural and maturing process. Goodman (1986) stated that reading and writing involve children learning in any social context that enables them to develop literacy before they start formal school instruction in reading and writing. As Goodman (1986) reports that when shown familiar environmental print, such as cereal boxes, familiar logos and signs, 60% of 3 year olds and 80 percent of 5 year olds could *read*. It is clear that before any concepts associated with the fine-grained decoding of text can hold any significance, children do need to have a more basic awareness of print.

2.3 Bottom-Up vs. Top-Down Approaches

Arguments between what have been termed *bottom-up* and *top-down* approaches (Smith, 1971; Goodman, 1986) have historically held a central position in the debate about the teaching of reading in the West. Stanovich and Stanovich (1999) have described these debates as the *reading wars*, and suggested that whole language versus phonics-emphasis controversy of the last decade has "*generated acrimony, sapped the field's energies and most important of all, confused and demoralized educators*" (1999, p. 12). Before starting the whole language approach (top-down model) it may be useful to introduce some of the central ideas of the *bottom-up model*. Briefly, the *bottom-up* model assumes that the process of learning to read starts with the recognition of letters then clusters of letters, then words and so on progressively until finally a whole text can be processed. Taken at its most extreme, the assumption can be that the concepts and skills are acquired in a step-by-step process, requiring a careful and cumulative introduction to the elements of written language: first letters, then words, then phrase or sentences and then stories and books in a linear fashion (Gough, 1972).

Smith (1971) and Goodman (1976) criticize the *bottom-up model* believing to lead to an over-emphasis on decoding at the expense of other skills and concepts. Furthermore, a major problem with the extreme *bottom-up model* lies with the model of knowledge and learning it appears to assume. It does not fit with the large and influential corpus of current thinking, which does not believe that knowledge can be described as a series of *chunks* that are acquired one after another (Bruner, 1996). In understanding literacy as a social practice, the focus has shifted from viewing language and literacy as a set of rules to using literacy in authentic events. Reading and writing are considered elements of larger practices that are socially patterned and cognition in literacy learning is seen as guided by social participation and relationships (Gee, 1996; Barton & Hamilton, 2000). To properly understand literacy processes one must locate them within interactions of social and cultural practices, that is, literacy learning occurs through social interactions and relationships with others (Street, 1984). The child is not considered as an *empty vessel* to be gradually filled by the teachers, but as partners in the social process of literacy learning (Berger, 2005). Dyson (2001) argued that literacy learning should begin with children's social worlds. Learning about print knowledge, or gaining knowledge about reading and writing, can occur in many different contexts.

3. Research Method

This research employed a means of questionnaire was to gain an overall picture of many teachers' perceptions of teaching literacy and children's literacy learning from a large sample. This would act as a springboard for more qualitative methods such as interview and observation to provide a greater in-depth picture of the phenomenon (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

200 questionnaires were distributed to nursery, preschool and kindergarten between September 2008 and January 2009 in Taiwan. A total of 173 were returned but 4 had to be rejected due to incomplete information. Therefore, 169 questionnaires (84%) were completed and analyzed. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first included introductory questions to find out if the sample represented a normal range of early year's practitioners; the second section consisted of 17 items to assess early-years teachers' literacy instruction in their daily teaching classroom. The last section consisted of 24 items to explore teachers' beliefs about literacy.

In the questionnaire section one, the teachers assessed their own approach to teaching literacy. A seven point continuum was given with the whole language and child centered approaches at one end and traditional skills based and a teacher-directed approach at the other end. The respondents were asked to tick a box which most represented their own approach to teaching.

The second section of the questionnaire is about teacher's course design for whole language approach activities. There were altogether 17 statements and the respondents were asked to rank them on a 4 point Likert-scale in order of importance, from the most important to the least important, or from very often to not often, as appropriate. The seventeen statements covered a wide range of teaching behaviour in the classroom. Some were associated more with whole language and a child centered approach; others with a skills-based, teacher-directed approach. With a 4-point Likert scale, a mean above 3 would indicate a generally positive answer to the statement while a mean below 2 would mean a negative answer. Furthermore, the four answers (*very often, often, not quite often or not often*) are also grouped into two, general tendency, groups. The reason for re-grouping the responses in this way is that, firstly, a 4-point Likert scale has no midpoint to follow or for comparison.

4. Data Analysis

The questionnaire results were analysed under the following headings:

- 1) Teacher's reactions towards the whole language in the literacy classroom
- 2) Teacher's approach of assessing their own approach to teaching literacy
- 3) Teacher's decision making in the literacy classroom
- 4) Teacher's perceptions of literacy
- 5) Availability of resources in the school
- 6) Teachers' reported practices in the literacy classroom

4.1 Teacher's Reactions towards the Whole Language in the Literacy Classroom

The result in Figure 1 shows that over half of teachers 50.3% approved of and agreed with the idea of the whole language approach.

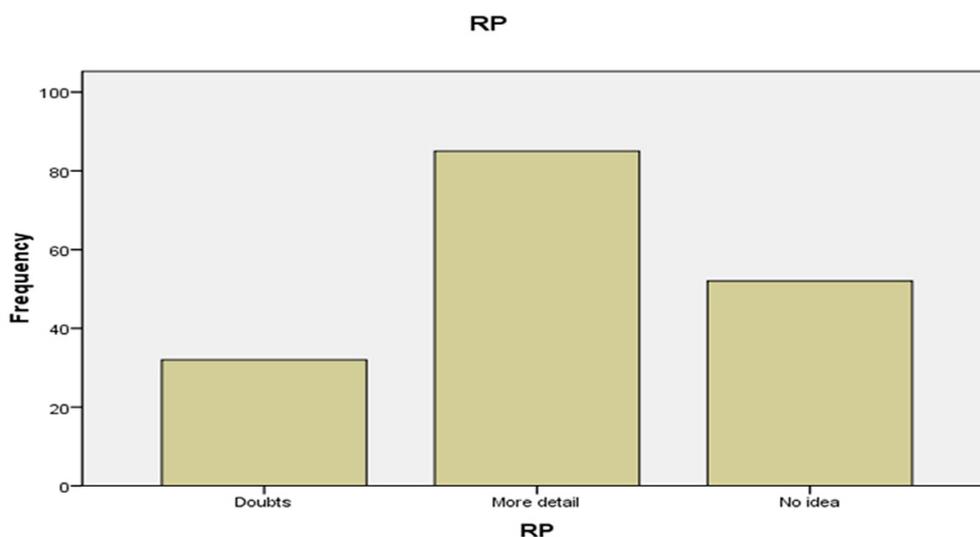


Figure 1. Conception of whole language approach

Moreover, 30.8% of the teachers said that they were not sure what the whole language approach is, how it could work or how it could be successfully implemented, so they reported that they had some reservations and were doubtful at the same time. On the other hand, only 18.9% of the respondents expressed any explicit doubts and reservations towards the new approach. However, this result also showed some of the extra comments made by the teachers while answering the questionnaire about literacy teaching and the whole language approach. These comments was given by those who chose "others" in this section, then giving the reason that teachers are

Table 3. Teachers perceptions of literacy

The reasons why literacy is good for you (n = 169)	Count	%
To receive knowledge to become knowledgeable.	134	79%
To cope with textbooks and exams.	89	53%
To find out truth with effort and pleasure.	141	83%
To help in work.	145	86%
To demonstrate positive attitudes to others.	118	70%

An overwhelming consensus was found in the belief that literacy is good for pupils: *to help with work* (86%), *to find out truth with effort and pleasure* (83%), and *to receive knowledge to become knowledgeable* (79%). At the same time, a large number of the respondents (118, over 70%) selected *to demonstrate positive attitudes to others* and *to cope with textbooks and exams* (53%), reflecting the traditional Confucian conception of literacy learning, which is to become a knowledgeable role model.

4.5 Availability of Resources in the School

The results show that 90.6 % of the teachers are of the opinion that their schools in general have sufficient resources of books in the school main libraries rather than individual classroom literacy corners. Based on the result of a more specific question about the individual classrooms, 65.2% of the teachers mention that they do not have enough books and reading materials in their classroom literacy corners; only 34.8% of the teachers claimed they had enough literacy resources. These figures indicate that many, if not most, of early year classroom literacy corners still lack sufficient books and materials.

4.6 Teachers' Reported Practices in the Literacy Classroom

Based on the responses to the second section of the questionnaire it appears that what the respondents reported and believed was reflected in their responses to the statements on classroom practices. In order to get a clearer picture of the views expressed by these teachers, the results are presented in two separate tables (Table 4 and Table 5) to show the results in descending order based on mean averages.

Table 4 shows the mean, SD, percentage of agreement and mode scores of the cluster of 9 items for the whole language approach and child-centered practice.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for whole language approach activities

Item No.	Item description (n= 169)	Mean	SD	Agree %	MODE
14	I often ask pupil to join the reading or library area	3.54	.732	91.7%	4
1	Pay special attention to children's interests in literacy	3.53	.557	97%	4
11	I often read story to my pupil and also create opportunities for them to share and express.	3.46	.598	95.8%	4
4	Using children's book	3.44	.606	95.3%	4
13	I create opportunities and encourage children to express and share their own ideas, feeling or opinions	3.23	.645	90.5%	3
7	Using a mix of materials	3.18	.792	83.4%	3
12	I often introduce new vocabulary based on a familiar story book.	3.03	.812	81.7%	3
8	Using Children's newspaper or magazine	2.30	1.004	46.7%	3
9	Using audio book or e-resources	2.18	1.062	45.6%	2
Overall average of mean		3.10			

The overall scores averaged 3.10 on the 4-point scale, which is moderately toward the high agreement side of the scale. In fact, seven of the nine items show agreement within the range of 81.7% to 97%. The strongest rating was for Item 1, for which 97% of teachers agreed with the statement about paying great attention to children's

interests in literacy. Also, the majority of teachers positively agreed with items 14, 11 12, which were statements regarding the use of stories and library materials to encourage pupils to express themselves and engage with the vocabulary learning. At the same time, a large majority of respondents claimed that they create opportunities for interaction in the classroom (Item 13: 90.5% of teachers).

On the other hand, teachers tended to disagree with items 8 and 9, statements about the use of children's newspapers, magazines or audio books and any e-resources. All the above statements of teaching behaviour were closely associated with the whole language and children-centred approaches, except those presented in Table 5 below. Here, it seems that teachers were asking children to do a lot of repetition and imitating, often considered to be part of the traditional approach, which was also frequently observed in literacy lessons. Table 5 demonstrates that the majority see value in skills-based activities for classroom practice.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for skills based activities

Item No.	Item description (n= 169)	Mean	SD	Agree %	MODE
3	Stress on good rules and try to keep good order during class time	3.52	.557	98.20%	4
5	I often using textbook	3.43	.843	89.90%	4
2	Pay entire attention to skill based practice	3.30	.543	95.9%	3
6	I often use flash cards	3.28	.866	85.80%	4
15	I often keen in give lesson and explain vocabulary, phonics most of the time then pupils do some focused practice.	3.12	.999	84%	3
10	I often use a skills practice book and work book	2.88	1.051	71.60%	3
16	I often ask my pupils to recite. Coping and practicing words helps memorization.	2.79	1.023	73.40%	3
17	In class, most of the time pupil do a lot of repetition and drilling after my talk to practice new words and dialogues	2.36	1.136	54.40%	2
Overall average of mean		3.9			

The data show that in seven of the eight items, teachers agreed with the statements. The skills-based activities most likely to be carried out are those identified in items 3, 5, 2, 6, 15, 10 and 16. However, teacher responses to item 17 were relatively divided (54.40%). Specifically, this statement was about practices discussed in the research literature as predominantly supported by skills-based advocates. According to the data, this statement reflected a separate view in practice, relating to asking children to frequently repeat and imitate.

The overall data in Tables 4 and 5 show that teachers' classroom practice of literacy teaching was mostly an interactive approach, indicating that most teachers prefer neither the whole language approach nor a skills-based approach. They report that they teach with a blend of methods and techniques drawn from both approaches.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the Teacher Questionnaire give a snapshot of the main tendencies informing teachers' perspective of literacy teaching and learning clustered primarily in the interactive approach. The analysis indicated that most teachers prefer neither the traditional skills-based approach/teacher-directed view of literacy teaching, nor the social interaction/whole language view of literacy teaching and learning. They used a blend of methods and techniques, drawing from both the whole language approach and the skills-based approach. The questionnaire acted as a way of understanding teachers' lives. Further studies are necessary to investigate teacher's beliefs and their practice of the whole language approach in the classroom.

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