



## THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN EFL HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND THEIR INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES REGARDING READING STRATEGIES

Fatemeh KHONAMRI\*

Mahin SALIMI\*\*

**Abstract:** Previous research has revealed the influential role of teachers' beliefs in determining their professional behavior; that is, the ways they plan their lessons, the kinds of decision they make, and the methods they apply in their classrooms. The present study aimed, first, to investigate the construct of teachers' belief systems about reading strategies among EFL high school teachers, then to explore the degree of discrepancies or consistencies between teachers' beliefs about reading strategies and their practical teaching activities in the context of English teaching as a foreign language in high schools of Iran, Mazandaran. Based on questionnaire data from 57 teachers, teachers' beliefs and their self-reported classroom employment of reading strategies were explored. Findings indicated that teachers believe that reading strategies play an important role in reading comprehension and that it is necessary to teach reading strategies in reading classes. The results also revealed that there is inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and their self-reported classroom practice.

**Keywords:** Teacher beliefs, instructional practices, reading strategies.

**Özet:** Önceki çalışmalar öğretmen inancının, öğretmenlerin profesyonel davranışlarını belirlemedeki önemli etkisini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu davranışlar; öğretmenlerin dersleri planlama biçimleri, aldıkları kararlar ve sınıflarında kullandıkları yöntemlerdir. Bu çalışmada öncelikle İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğreten lise öğretmenlerinin okuma stratejileri bağlamında inanç sistemlerine dair yapıyı araştırmak amaçlanmıştır. Ayrıca, öğretmenlerin okuma stratejilerine dair inançları ile, İran, Mazandarandaki liselerde İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak öğretildiği derslerdeki uygulamalarda yaptıkları öğretim faaliyetleri arasındaki tutarlık ya da tutarsızlık derecesini belirlemek hedeflenmiştir. 57 öğretmenin katıldığı anketten elde edilen bulgulara dayanarak, öğretmenlerin inançları ve kendi aktarımlarıyla, okuma stratejilerine dair sınıf içi uygulamaları belirlenmiştir. Sonuçlar göstermektedir ki, öğretmenler okuduğunu anlamada okuma stratejilerinin büyük önemine olduğuna inanmakta ve dolayısıyla okuma stratejilerinin yine okuma derslerinde öğretilmesinin gerekli olduğunu düşünmektedirler. Sonuçlar ayrıca göstermiştir ki, öğretmenlerin inançları ve sınıf içi uygulamaları arasında tutarsızlık bulunmaktadır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Öğretmenlerin inançları, öğretim uygulamaları, okuma stratejileri.

### Introduction

The relationship between teachers' beliefs and instructional practices has increasingly attracted attention in recent years in science education (King, Shumow, and Lietz, 2000), mathematical education (Fulton, 1999), and bilingual instruction (Mora, 1999, cited in Cummins et al, 2004). This relationship has also drawn the attention of reading professionals (Cheek, Flippo, & Lindsey, 1989, 1997; Leu & Kinzer, 2003; Tompkins, 2003).

\* Mazandaran University, Babulsar, Iran. E-mail: fkhonamri@yahoo.com

\*\* Mazandaran University, Babulsar, Iran.

Recent research in the area of reading comprehension has focused on reading-related strategies, and strategy-training studies. For the most part, such studies have found that strategy training leads to improved reading performance. (Singhal, 2001).

Moreover, it is true that many educators have proposed or supposed the relationship between what teachers believe about how reading takes place and how they develop reading skills in their classroom. However empirical investigation of this relationship has been limited and is a relatively recent development (Pace & Powers, 1981). On the other hand, as Chou (2008:192) contends, “the little amount of studies on investigating teachers’ beliefs in the area of second language reading instruction have indicated an unclear picture of teachers’ belief construct in teaching reading”. Therefore, more research on exploring teachers’ beliefs and the actual instructional practices regarding reading is necessary.

Although described as the most valuable psychological construct to teacher education (Pintrich 1990), beliefs have been acknowledged as being notoriously difficult to define, with Pajares (1992, p.2) labeling them a “messy construct [that] travels in disguise and often under alias.” These aliases include “explicit propositions” (Nisbett and Ross 1980), “teachers’ subjectively reasonable beliefs” (Harootunian and Yarger 1981), “implicit theories” (Clark and Peterson 1986), “conceptions” (Ekeblad and Bond 1994), “personal theories” (Borg 1999), “personal pedagogical systems” (Borg 1998), “judgments” (Yero 2002) “untested assumptions” (Calderhead 1996), “perceptions” (Schulz 2001), “pedagogical principles” (Breen, Hird et al. 2001), “theories for practices” (Burns 1996), “images” (Golombek 1988) and “maxims” (Richards 1996, cited in Mohamed, 2006).

Clark & Peterson (1986) agree that teachers’ theories and beliefs represent a rich store of knowledge, and argue that teachers make sense of their world and respond to it by forming a complex system of personal and professional knowledge. In referring to beliefs as personal knowledge, Kagan (1992) argues that much of a teacher’s professional knowledge can be more accurately regarded as belief. Kagan believes that as a teacher’s experience in the profession increases, this knowledge grows richer and more coherent and forms a highly personalized pedagogy or belief system that constrains the teacher’s perception, judgment and behavior. Richards & Lockhart (1994), too, maintain that beliefs are built up gradually over time. They argue that beliefs consist of both subjective and objective dimensions, and serve as the background to much of the teachers’ decision making and classroom actions. Beliefs are formed early in life as a result of a person’s education and experience and strong beliefs about learning and teaching are well established by the time a student completes schooling (Johnson, 1994).

Beliefs may be derived from other sources like established practices, teachers’ personality factors, educational principles, research-based evidence, and principles derived from an approach or method (Richards and Lockhart, 1996). Studies of teacher beliefs reveal that teachers have beliefs about all aspects of their work. Calderhead (1996) argues that there are five main areas in which teachers have been found to hold significant beliefs including beliefs about learners and learning, teaching, subjects or curriculum, learning to teach, and about the self and the nature of teaching. He also notes that these five areas are closely related and may well be interconnected. The structure of teachers’ beliefs is by no means uniform or simple.

Beliefs appear to be interconnected and multi-faceted. Beliefs strongly influence both perception and behavior, with Pajares (1992, p. 324) claiming that their filtering effect “ultimately screens, redefines, distorts, or reshapes subsequent thinking and information processing.” Beliefs exist in connection to other beliefs and may in fact contradict one another

(Breen, Hird et al. 2001), reflecting the complexity of belief systems. Clark & Peterson (1986) agree that they are complex and eclectic, and suggest that there are wide variations in teachers' belief systems even among those who are committed to the same educational practices.

It has been only relatively recently that SL education researchers began to recognize the importance of exploring the cognitive dimensions of teachers' thoughts, attitudes and decisions, and how they may affect the nature of instruction (e.g. Freeman 1989; Johnson 1990). In his review of research on language teacher belief, Borg (2003) notes that between 1976 and 2002, 64 studies have been published in this field. Most of the research does not examine teacher belief in relation to a specific curricular area, but focuses on more general processes such as knowledge growth and change or planning and decision making.

Several themes can be identified in research on teacher beliefs. One of them, beliefs in relation to classroom practices, which relate to the present study, was dealt with in this study. Teachers' beliefs in relation to classroom practices are by far the most researched theme in SL/FL teacher cognition research. Gatbonton's (1999) study, relating to the patterns of pedagogical knowledge of seven experienced ESL teachers in the USA, revealed that teachers' thoughts and decisions related largely to language concerns (such as explaining new vocabulary and creating contexts for meaningful language use). In contrast, Nunan's (1992) study of the interactive decisions of nine ESL teachers in Australia found that teachers' decisions related little to language concerns. Issues of classroom management such as the pacing and timing of lessons, the amount of teacher talk and the quality of their instructions and explanations to the students appeared to be more of a concern for the teachers in this study.

Several studies have highlighted the impact of social, psychological and environmental factors such as school requirements, society's expectations, state policies, mandated curriculum, and the practices of peers, workload and the availability of resources that have affected teachers' practices in the classroom. Such external factors were seen to play a key role in teachers' decisions, planning and instructional content for the six ESL teachers of beginning adult migrants in Burns' (1996) study. (For more information see Spada & Massey, 1992; Crookes & Arakaki, 1999; Johnson, 1992; Richards & Pennington, 1998). A study by Breen et al (2001) also illuminates the complex relationship between beliefs and practices.

Chou (2008) conducted a study based on the assumption that teachers are highly influenced by their beliefs. He investigated the construct of teachers' belief systems about reading approaches among 42 university instructors and explored the degree of discrepancies or consistencies between teachers' beliefs about reading theories and their practical teaching activities in the EFL setting of Taiwan. The findings showed that there were no significant differences between the participants' beliefs and their use of each reading approach.

In a study, Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis (2004) found evidence of incongruence between SL teachers' stated beliefs and their classroom practices related to form-focused instruction. These inconsistencies related mainly to when it was appropriate to focus on form during a meaning-focused lesson and the type of error correction techniques to be employed. Basturkmen, et al indicate that it may be better to view the stated beliefs of teachers to be "potentially conflictual rather than inherently inconsistent" (p. 268), suggesting that the differences between beliefs and practices are challenges that teachers need to resolve. This follows from several reports of incongruence between teachers' stated beliefs and observed

(or reported) practices in mainstream education (see Fang 1996). As Fang notes, such inconsistencies are not unexpected due to the demands and complexities of classroom life which constrain teachers' abilities to provide instruction that aligns perfectly with their beliefs.

Moreover, there has never been consensus among researchers for a clear cut definition of reading strategies. This diversity is largely due to the way the term has been used in different contexts such as first, second, or foreign language learning (Cohen, 1998). However, research on second language reading strategies indicates that strategies refer to conscious reading behavior. They include a wide range of cognitive mental activities which include skimming, scanning, predicting, guessing, making inferences, confirming or disconfirming inferences, identifying main idea... and rereading (Carrell, 1998).

Oxford (1990) lists a large number of strategies which she argues have been shown to correlate positively with those who use reading successfully to learn language. Among those, she lists the following strategies for reading: repeating, or "saying or doing something over and over;" "formally practicing with sounds (pronunciation, intonation, register, etc.) in a variety of ways, but not yet in naturalistic communicative practices;" "using resources for receiving and sending messages," which she says includes "using print or non-print resources to understand incoming messages or produce outgoing messages;" and "placing new words into a context," which includes "placing a word or phrase in a meaningful sentence" in order to remember it. Oxford's research suggests that reading something repeatedly, and aloud, benefits the SL student. She also suggests that print materials can be used to produce SL utterances.

Anderson (2003) defined reading as the interaction of four things. He believed that together with the reader and the text there must also be fluent reading, or "the ability to read at an appropriate rate with adequate comprehension", and strategic reading or "the ability of the reader to use a wide variety of reading strategies to accomplish a purpose for reading" (p.68).

Discovering the best methods and techniques for achieving fluent reading with adequate comprehension, and identifying what techniques or processes the learners choose to access, is the goal of research in reading strategies. Moreover, the effectiveness of teaching reading strategies has been the subject of over "500 studies in the last twenty five years" and what these studies have concluded is that "strategy instruction improves comprehension" (Willingham, 2007, p.39).

Therefore, in this study, reading strategies were investigated with relation to teachers' beliefs about such strategies and their consequent instructional practices. The aim was to find out to what extent EFL teachers were aware of the importance of these strategies and whether they translated their beliefs into relevant instructional practices. For the purpose of the study, 20 reading strategies specified in the "Teaching Reading questionnaire" were explored.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of the current research was to investigate the relation between EFL high school teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices regarding reading strategies. To fulfill the purpose of the study the following research questions were raised.

1. What beliefs do EFL high school teachers hold about reading strategies?
2. To what extent do teachers' beliefs correspond to their instructional practices?

## Participants and Setting

The participants were 57 conveniently selected, EFL high school teachers teaching in different high schools in Babol, Babolsar, and Freydoon Kenar, three cities of Mazandaran Province. The teachers were male and female with the ratio of male to female about 33% to 65%, a range of teaching experience from 5 to 25 years, a range of degree from B.A to Ph. D, and with specialties like TEFL, Linguistics, English Literature, and English Translation. The vast majority, 44 (77%) were experienced EFL high School teachers having more than 10 years experience of teaching English. Table 1 summarizes the participants' demographic information.

**Table 1.**The Demographic Information of the Participants

Category	Level	Number	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	19	33
	Female	37	65
	Missing value	1	2
<b>Years of Teaching</b>	5-10	12	21
	10-15	22	39
	15-20	22	39
	20-25	1	2
<b>Degree of Education</b>	BA	47	82
	MA	7	12
	PH.D	1	2
	Missing Value	2	4
<b>Specialty</b>	TEFL	32	56
	Linguistics	3	5
	Literature	7	12
	Translation	11	19
	Missing Value	4	7

Total Number of the Participants: 57

## Instrument

This study utilized the "Teaching Reading Strategies Questionnaire" devised by Chou 2008. It is a five- page questionnaire which consists of a mixture of close and open-ended questions. The questionnaire adapted Likert Scales 1 to 5, in which 1 indicates the least important or the least agreement on a certain statement, while 5 refers to the most important or strongest agreement of the item. It consists of two parts. Part I: Reading Strategy and Part II: Individual Background. The first part includes three sections; A, B, and C.

Section A investigates what teachers believe about the importance of reading strategies in reading comprehension. Section B investigates what teachers believe about the necessity of reading strategies in teaching practices, and Section C investigates the actual employment of reading strategies in teachers' reading classes. Each section contains 20 identical elements that are considered important factors in reading comprehension.

The 20 items are classified into six categories of reading strategies. Items 1-3 refer to linguistic knowledge, such as studying vocabulary or grammar. Item 4 is about translation, namely translating English texts into L1. Items 5-8 are related to conceptually-driven basis, such as activating background knowledge or understanding the connections between paragraphs. Items 9-16 concern cognitive strategies, such as guessing, scanning or skimming. Items 17-18 are about metacognitive strategies, such as monitoring learners' reading comprehension. Finally, items 19 and 20 are categorized as aided strategies. Part II, Individual Background, sought some personal information about the respondents.

## Results

The data obtained from the "Teaching Reading Questionnaire", Table 2, presents means and standard deviations given to each item in teachers' beliefs about the importance of reading strategies in reading comprehension.

**Table 2.** Means, Standard Deviations for Each Item in Teachers' beliefs about the Importance of Reading Strategies in Reading Comprehension

Item	Mean	SD
1. Vocabulary	4.14	0.77
2. Grammar	2.82	0.90
3. Reading aloud the text	2.60	1.10
4. Translating the Text into Farsi	2.24	1.11
5. Activating prior knowledge or background knowledge about the reading content	3.87	0.95
6. Understanding the connections of each paragraph	3.80	0.85
7. Understanding the types of the text	3.26	0.97
8. Title	3.56	1.09
9. Guessing the meaning of words	4.12	0.71
10. Scanning	3.79	0.94
11. Skimming	3.91	0.91
12. Finding main idea	4.14	0.80
13. Summarizing	3.65	0.67
14. Outlining	3.25	0.94
15. Retelling	3.31	0.98

16. Predicting the main idea of the following paragraph	3.23	0.95
17. Monitoring reading comprehension constantly	3.35	0.97
18. Asking questions to check comprehension	4.07	0.84
19. Using dictionaries	3.19	0.85
20. Using visual support	3.32	0.81

The results showed that the means of 10 out of 20 items (50% of the overall items) were in the high range (mean 3.5-5), while 9 out of 20 items (45% of the overall) fitted in the medium range (mean 2.5-3.4). The remaining 1 item was placed in the low range (mean 1-2.4). "Vocabulary" (Mean 4.14, SD. 0.77), "Finding main idea" (Mean 4.14, SD. 0.80), and "Guessing the meaning of words" (Mean 4.12, SD. 0.71) were the three most important teaching strategies advocated by the teachers. In addition, the three least important strategies were "Translating to Farsi" (Mean 2.24, SD. 1.11), "Reading aloud the text" (Mean 2.60, SD.1.10), and "Grammar" (Mean 2.82, SD. 0.90).

Means and standard deviations of the six categories for the three parts, namely the importance of reading strategies in reading comprehension, the necessity of reading strategies in teaching practices, and the actual employment of reading strategies in classrooms are presented in Table 3. The results showed that the metacognitive strategy category (Mean 3.72, SD.0.73) was reported the most important category in reading comprehension while the linguistic knowledge category was the least important one (Mean 3.20, SD.0.67).

**Table 3.** Means, Standard deviations for Each Category

Category	Mean	SD
Part A: Importance of Reading Strategies for Reading Comprehension		
Linguistic Knowledge	3.20	0.67
Translation	2.24	1.11
Conceptually-driven Basis	3.63	0.69
Cognitive Strategy	3.68	0.46
Metacognitive Strategy	3.72	0.73
Aided Strategy	3.25	0.66
Overall	3.49	0.39
Part B: Necessity of Reading Strategies in Teaching Practices		
Linguistic Knowledge	3.27	0.74
Translation	2.18	1.09
Conceptually-driven Basis	3.38	0.72
Cognitive Strategy	3.69	0.59
Metacognitive Strategy	3.74	0.74
Aided Strategy	3.61	0.65
Overall	3.59	0.42
Part C: Actual Employment of Reading Strategy		
Linguistic Knowledge	3.77	0.76

Translation	2.98	1.30
Conceptually-driven Basis	3.30	0.76
Cognitive Strategy	3.29	0.76
Metacognitive Strategy	3.74	0.74
Aided Strategy	3.11	0.81
Overall	3.37	0.51

In summary the six categories' rank order for each part could be elicited from Table 3 as follows:

Part A: The importance of reading strategies for reading comprehension

1. Metacognitive Strategy
2. Cognitive Strategy
3. Conceptually-Driven Basis Strategy
4. Aided Strategy
5. Translation
6. Linguistic knowledge

Part B: Necessity of reading strategies in teaching practices

1. Metacognitive Strategy
2. Cognitive Strategy
3. Aided Strategy
4. Conceptually-Driven Basis Strategy
5. Linguistic Knowledge
6. Translation

Part C: Actual employment of reading strategies in reading classes

1. Linguistic Knowledge
2. Metacognitive Strategy
3. Conceptually-Driven Basis Strategy
4. Cognitive Strategy
5. Aided Strategy
6. Translation

Spearman's rho was computed to investigate the correlation between the three parts as well as the six categories of reading strategies.

**Table 4.**Correlation between the Three Parts of Reading Strategies

Part	Importance	Necessity	Employment
Importance of Reading Strategies	1.000	1.000	0.211
Necessity of Reading Strategies	0.627 <sup>□</sup>	1.000	0.449 <sup>□</sup>
Actual Employment of Reading Strategy	0.211	0.449 <sup>□</sup>	1.000

Correlations are significant at the 0.05 level and 0.01 level ( 1-tailed )

The data provided evidence that the three parts--the importance of reading strategies in reading comprehension, the necessity of reading strategies in teaching practices, and actual employment of reading strategies in practical classrooms, correlated with each other (see Table 4). The positive correlation indicated that the degree of importance of each part increased as its counterpart similarly did.

**Table 5.**Correlation between the Categories of Reading Strategies

Category	Ling A	Concept A	Cog A	Metacog A	Aided A
Ling B	0.562*	--	--	--	--
Ling C	0.187	--	--	--	--
Concept B	--	0.557*	--	--	--
Concept C	--	0.318	--	--	--
Cog B	--	--	0.499*	--	--
Cog C	--	--	0.188	--	--
Metacog B	--	--	--	0.563*	--
Metacog C	--	--	--	0.563*	--
Aided B	--	--	--	--	0.679*
Aided C	--	--	--	--	0.170

\*Correlations are significant at the 0.05 and 0.01 level (1-tailed)

## Conclusion and Discussion

Based on the teachers' responses to "Teaching Reading Questionnaire", it seems that teachers believe that reading strategies are important in reading comprehension (Mean.3.49, SD.0.39) and it is necessary to teach reading strategies in reading classes (Mean.3.59, SD.0.42).

Furthermore, EFL high school teachers believe that metacognitive strategies are the most important strategies in reading comprehension while linguistic category is the least important in reading comprehension. Moreover, metacognitive strategies position in the highest and translation falls in the lowest necessity of teaching in reading classes. These findings are consistent with Chou's findings. Chou (2008) concluded that EFL instructors believed that reading strategies are important in reading comprehension (Mean. 3.59, SD. 0.53) and it is necessary to teach reading strategies in reading classes (Mean. 3.64, SD. 0.53). The results had shown that the instructors emphasized linguistic knowledge, cognitive strategy, and metacognitive strategy category. It should be mentioned that linguistic knowledge hadn't been emphasized by the current research teachers.

The result obtained from "Teaching Reading Strategies" also revealed that the relation between teachers' belief and practices is really a complex relationship. As it was shown in Table 4 there was a positive correlation between teachers' belief about the necessity of reading strategies in teaching practices and their self reported actual employment of reading strategies or classroom practices. However, there was no significant correlation between teachers' beliefs about the importance of reading strategies and their self reported classroom practices. So, there was some discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and their self reported practices.

These findings are unlike the findings of Garden's (1996) and Chou's (2008) studies. Garden (1996) studied six secondary teachers of French and Spanish in the USA and found generally a consistent relationship between teachers' reported beliefs and their observed practices in reading instruction. Chou (2008) also concluded that there were no significant differences between the participants' beliefs and their use of each reading approach. The results of this study, however, are like the finding of Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis' (2004) study. They found evidence of incongruence between L2 teachers' stated beliefs and their classroom practices related to form-focused instruction.

The inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and their practices is not unexpected. Earlier researchers have noted that the complexities of classroom life can constrain teachers' abilities

to attend to their beliefs and provide instruction which aligns with their theoretical beliefs (Duffy, 1982; Duffy and Anderson, 1984; Duffy and Ball, 1986; Paris, Wasik and Turner, 1991; Roehler and Duffy, 1991, cited in Fang, 1996). This suggests that contextual factors can have powerful influences on teachers' beliefs and affect their classroom practices.

Several possibilities can explain the mismatch between teachers' beliefs and their actual practices. Even though teachers may have wanted to teach reading strategies explicitly in their practices, their unfamiliarity with the right way to do this may have led them to teach differently. In other words, teachers may lack the procedural knowledge (Mohammed, 2006). Another explanation for the mismatch between beliefs and practices may be attributed to the contextual factors and classroom life (Fang, 1996). Contextual factors, like too little weekly time, big classes, students with multiple levels of motivation and English competence, final assessments, teachers' workload, teachers' motivation, parents' and managers' demands may also have acted as barriers that prevented teachers from enacting their beliefs. It is also likely that teachers presented themselves in a more favorable light in answering the questionnaire, as it is human nature to portray ourselves in the most positive manner (Mohammed, 2006). However, another possible explanation for this inconsistency might be the fact that teachers in Iran do not learn anything about the techniques to teach reading strategies. One reason may be related to the difficulty associated with the teaching of these strategies; and another is the application of them in real classes. In other words, even if our teachers have learnt how to teach reading strategies, chances that they might apply them are almost next to zero because it is definitely easier to teach grammar and vocabulary than reading strategies. To find more definitive answers, however, the factors that prevent teachers to execute based on their beliefs and the reasons for the mismatch between self-reported practices and the actual practices can be issues for further research.

The main implication of the current study concerns EFL teachers. Teachers are more likely to change when they are shown that a discrepancy exists between what they would ideally like to do and what they actually do. So, teachers should be trained to acknowledge how their beliefs and context-specific factors contribute to their practices. In fact, perhaps by making teachers aware of their skills and weaknesses, we can take a step towards helping them to address how to improve their practices and become more effective teachers. One way to do this is holding workshops at regular basis for teachers to attend in which they teach strategy-based instruction. Of course, it should be mentioned here that these workshops might not result in developing more efficient teachers, but at least they may help reduce the discrepancy.

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