

# Reading Instruction, Its Place in the Current Primary Education Curriculum of Turkey and Misbeliefs about Reading Instruction

Veli KUTAY\*

## Abstract

Reading is one of the main components of literacy. Reading instruction is an important part of language acquisition process and different reading instruction methods might be used to teach reading. Turkey began to implement a new primary education curriculum in 2004. In the new curriculum, previous reading instruction method which had been used in schools also changed. In 2004, the Ministry of National Education initiated phoneme based method in teaching to read instead of whole language method which had been used since 1981. This paper aims at discussing the advantages and disadvantages of different reading instruction methods and discussing the misbeliefs about reading instruction.

**Keywords:** Reading instruction, curriculum, misbeliefs about reading instruction

## Okuma Öğretimi, Türk İlkokul Müfredatındaki Yeri ve Okuma Öğretimi ile İlgili Yanlış İnanışlar

### Öz

Okuma okur-yazarlığın ana unsurlarından birisidir. Okuma öğretimi dil edinim sürecinin önemli bir parçasıdır ve okuma öğretiminde birçok farklı yöntem kullanılabilir. Türkiye'de 2004 yılında yeni bir ilköğretim müfredatı uygulanmaya başladı. Bu yeni müfredatta, okullarda uygulanan bir önceki okuma öğretim yöntemi de değişti. 2004'de, Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı okuma öğretiminde 1981 yılından beridir kullanılan bütüncül dil yöntemi yerine ses temelli yöntemi uygulamaya başladı. Bu makale farklı öğretim yöntemlerinin avantajlarını ve dezavantajlarını tartışmayı ve okuma öğretimi hakkındaki yanlış inanışları ele almayı amaçlamaktadır.

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\* Öğr. Gör. Dr. Giresun Üniversitesi Hüseyin Hüsnü Tekışık Eğitim Fakültesi Türkçe Eğitimi Bölümü El.mek: veli.kutay@giresun.edu.tr, kutayveli66@gmail.com

## Introduction

The concept of curriculum has been a highly controversial issue since it was first implemented in education across the world. Some questions like 'what does it mean', 'what should be included in a curriculum', 'why certain things

should be taught' and 'who should get what knowledge' have had various answers and are still continued to be answered by educators and academics. Curriculum basically means that the set of courses and their contents and aims offered in a school or university. For Beauchamp (1982, p. 24), it is 'a document prepared for purposes of describing the goals and the scope and sequence of culture content selected for purposes of attaining the selected goals'.

After basically explained what the curriculum is, the concept of reading instruction will be defined. Learning to speak mother language is a natural process, but reading, in contrast, is not as same as speaking. According to Wren (2003), learning to read is the most unnatural thing human beings do. Therefore, in the process of learning to read, external support should be provided by someone who knows how to teach reading by using well designed instructional methods. In order to teach someone how to read, systematic instructional methods are needed and they are various. They need to be various because every child comes to school with different levels of literacy skills. In order to meet every individual's needs in a classroom, reading instruction methods should be differentiated (Ankrum & Bean, 2007). Although the fact that no single reading instruction method fits all children, one single method is being implemented officially and theoretically in Turkish primary schools to teach children how to read.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate reading instruction methods and to explore what reading instruction method is implemented according to the current primary education curriculum in Turkey. Firstly, a brief history of curriculum activities in Turkey will be given. Secondly, the concepts of literacy and reading acquisition will be identified. Thirdly, the reading instruction method in the 2004 Turkish primary curriculum will be investigated and other well known reading instruction methods will be examined in terms of their advantages and disadvantages. Then, misbeliefs about reading instruction will be given because of the importance of being aware of them in order to understand the process of reading acquisition more logically. At the end, a discussion and conclusion chapter will take place.

### **A brief history of primary education curriculum reforms in Turkey**

First educational curriculum endeavours go back to the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkish State, gave strong importance to education to transform the newly established state in regarding to social, technological, political, and cultural developments and

changes. To reorganise and restructure the education system, John Dewey, an American educational reformer, was invited to Turkey in 1924. He prepared a report including suggestions to restructure the Turkish education system. With the help of him, the first primary education curriculum appeared in 1924 (Akinoglu, 2008). From that time to now, primary education curriculum was revised, developed, changed, and renewed for many times because of the social, technological changes (Akinoglu, 2008; Koç et al., 2007).

Until the 1950s, curriculum activities were put into practice by preparing course and subject lists and mainly aimed to educate children as citizens who had the conscious of citizenship and the sense of patriotism (Akinoglu, 2008). The idea here might be understandable because the Ottoman Empire was a multinational country, but, in contrast, the Republic of Turkey was established as a one nation state. Therefore, one of the purposes of education at those times was to create the conscious of being a nation. After 1950s, curriculum development activities have begun to occur in a more systematic way in terms of its main objectives, aims and contents.

In addition, in the history of curriculum reforms in Turkey, military coups occurred in 1960 and 1980 have an important place. That is because after the coups, the military regimes firstly intended to change the education system and new educational curricula were issued or the existing ones were mostly revised just after the coups (Akinoglu, 2008).

The current primary education curriculum was adopted in 2004 and has begun to be implemented in the 2005-2006 school year. Board of Education and Discipline (2005) lists the main objectives of 2004 educational curriculum as follows (quoted in Aksit, 2007, p. 133-134):

- to reduce the amount of content and number of concepts
- to arrange the units thematically
- to develop nine core competencies across the curriculum
- to move from a teacher-centred didactic model to a student-centred constructivist model
- to incorporate ICT into instruction
- to monitor student progress through formative assessment
- to move away from traditional assessment of recall, and introduce authentic assessment
- to enhance citizenship education
- to introduce second language courses from primary school
- to widen the scope of religious education
- to establish a system of student representation, and engage students in community work
- The 2004 primary education curriculum, in addition, has much more

emphasis on international values, democratic consciousness with the national values than all old curricula did (Akinoglu, 2008). It includes five subject areas: mathematics, science, social science, life science and Turkish. Teaching language in the curriculum has probably the most important role because the acquisition of a language is one of the main determinants in teaching other subjects sufficiently. If a child cannot learn to read early and well, he/she cannot get success in gaining other skills and knowledge (The Association for Family Therapy (AFT), 1999).

### **Literacy Skills**

Communication is essential for all members of the society and having a language is crucial in communication. We communicate with people through written and spoken language. Due to the importance of it, the one of the initial aims in early years of schooling is to support children in the process of their acquisitions of language (National Literacy Strategy, 2002).

### **The Definition of Literacy**

Literacy basically means that the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a language. For NLS (2002, p. 3), “literacy unites the important skills of reading and writing. It also involves speaking and listening which are an essential part of it. Good oral work enhances pupil's understanding of language in both oral and written forms and of the way language can be used to communicate.”

Teaching literacy consists of four parts; reading, writing, speaking and listening. From these components, learning to understand spoken language and respond in the same way are indeed natural processes. Because of this reality, having these two skills does not make a child literate. Being literate for a pupil means to read and write with fluency and confidence and in correct spelling, to have a wide range of vocabulary to understand the meanings of written texts and to express his/her ideas in a clear and appropriate way, to be interested in books and to improve his/her power of imagination and critical awareness through reading and writing (NLS, 2002). In early grades of school, children learn to read, but in upper primary grades and beyond, they read to learn. It seems that in the process of acquisition of language, learning to read is probably the most significant component.

### **Reading Instruction**

The process of learning should be life-long and it is the fact that people keep learning something during their lives in some way. Learning might occur either through people's own experiences or other people's experiences through reading. Due to the importance of having reading skills, children are taught reading in schools by beginning from early grades. In order to become independent, proficient and life-long readers, children should be equipped with some basic skills.

- Letter knowledge
- Phonological awareness
- Phoneme awareness
- Vocabulary
- Decoding
- Comprehension

### **Reading Instruction Methods**

Children should be taught reading in appropriate ways and the process of teaching reading should follow a systematic way. Research shows that if children are not taught in an organised and a systematic way by effective teachers using well organised instructional methods, they are unlikely to become proficient readers (AFT, 1999). Across the world, the best way of teaching to read has been searched more than a century, but a single method does not exist so far (Sahin, 2006). It seems that there are three main methods in teaching to read; whole language method, phoneme based method and balanced method. In this paper, firstly, the method is being implemented in Turkey will be explained and later other methods will be dealt.

### **Phoneme Based Method**

Education in Turkey is administrated by the Ministry of National Education and curriculum developments are carried out by them as well. In 2004, the Ministry of National Education initiated phoneme based method in teaching to read instead of whole language method which had been used since 1981. This method basically works in the way that phonemes (the smallest unit of speech) are taught to children and syllables are formed with these phonemes. Then, words with syllables which are taught before and sentences with previously taught words are formed. According to Reyhner (2003), phone based method is a suitable method for Piaget's Constructivist Learning Theory (cited in Sahin, 2006, p. 4). The aim of the system which letters are taught first is that children discover phonic patterns and identify them in different syllables and words and build their skills in decoding unknown words. For National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000:8), initial purpose of phoneme based reading instruction is 'to help beginning readers understand how letters are linked to sounds (phonemes) to form letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns and to help them learn how to apply this knowledge in their reading'.

The Ministry of National Education (2004, p. 71) lists the main characteristics of phoneme based method in the 2004 primary education curriculum as follows:

- Reading instruction activities in the phoneme based method are not only for improving reading and writing skills isolated from listening and speaking, but also for improving the five learning skills of Turkish instruction; that are reading, writing, listening, speaking and visual

reading (graphical reading).

- Starting reading instruction with phonemes, then constructing meaningful syllables, words and sentences with these phonemes makes it easier for students to construct knowledge. From this aspect, phoneme based method is a suitable method for the Constructivist Approach to learning.
- Since each phoneme represents a letter in Turkish, Phonics is also appropriate for the phonemic structure of the Turkish language.
- This method helps learners to be aware of the phonemes they hear and produce and thus, contributes to their lingual development in terms of correct pronunciation, fluency, distinguishing of phonemes etc,
- Mastering all phonemes helps learners write words accurately,
- Learners realize the similarity between writing and speaking and understand that writing occurs by combining letters, and speaking occurs by combining phonemes, and
- Phonics makes the transition from oral language to written language easier.
- Phoneme based method is defended by many researchers across the world. Ediger (2000) summarizes their reasons to advocate this method as follows:
  - It can be a key to recognizing unknown words.
  - It provides security to learners in becoming independent in word identification.
  - It can be used along with whole word methods in reading Instruction.
  - It can be made interesting to readers and not be dull and boring through drill and more drill in phonics.
  - It will not be a 100% consistent way to identify unknown words due to irregularities in spelling of English words, but there is adequate consistency to warrant their attention in reading instruction.

### **Whole Language Method**

Before the appearance of the 2004 primary education curriculum, whole language method was used in teaching reading in Turkey. Previous curriculum was issued in 1981 and whole language method was accepted and began to be implemented in the same year.

In the whole language method, firstly, a short and meaningful sentence is showed to children and children are expected to recognise the words in this sentence and then the words are divided into syllables and finally syllables are divided into letters and phonemes. After this process, children are asked to make new syllables, words and sentences with those they have learnt before (Sahin, 2006).

Advocates of whole language method have the reasons using this approach in teaching to read as follows:

- Students read meaningful content rather than analyze words which may have no meaning for the reader.
- Students attach interest to what is being read in a story rather than being drilled on phonics and syllabication skills.
- Students learn to recognize words in context, not in isolation.
- Students receive reinforcement in word recognition through rereading and echoic reading of previously read content.
- Students observe the teacher reading aloud, followed by cooperative reading with the teacher, and then reread the same subject matter, such as in using the Big Book in reading instruction (Ediger, 2000).
- Teaching phonics and letters are also important in the whole language reading method, but according to Goodman (1993), they should not be taught directly, children can learn the identification of phonics and letters from meaningful texts and doing real writing. He lists the reasons not to teach phonic-letter relationships in a separated lesson as follows:
  - Such instruction turns reading from a process making sense into one of saying sounds for letters.
  - It ignores the meaning and structure of language. Phonics instruction distorts children's processing of language by taking instruction out of the language context.
  - It begins with abstractions instead of functional, meaningful language that's easy to learn (quoted in Pressley, 2005, p. 22).

### **Balanced Reading Method**

Every child has different types of intelligence. Gardner (1993) claims that it is wrong to define the concepts of intelligence in one way. Intelligence can have various types of it. He identifies 8 types of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, naturalistic, musical, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Thus, children have different types of learning styles and learn in different ways.

Due to the fact of existence of children who have different learning styles, no single reading instruction method fits all children in a classroom. Balanced reading method is basically a combination of phoneme based and whole language methods. Carbo (1996, quoted in Stoicheva, 1999) highlights that 'the "analytic and auditory students," in particular, benefit from phonics instruction; students with "visual, tactile and global learning styles" tend to profit from a whole language approach'. Therefore, it can be claimed that the balanced reading method needs to be implemented to meet the needs of more children. For Wren (2003), although the balanced method is defined as mix of

other methods, it is still not clear how to implement it in a classroom. He states that some understand it in the way of teaching phonics first and following whole language method later, but some understand it using phoneme based method, but children spend more time with books and texts.

### **Misbeliefs about Reading Instruction**

People have misconceptions about reading instruction. The beliefs which are most commonly agreed are in fact highly controversial. Wren (2003) examines the most damaging myths and misconceptions about reading instruction.

1-Learning to read is a natural process.

It is believed that learning to read is a natural process as learning to understand a spoken language and if children have the chance to reach written texts, they learn to read in their own way. In contrast, reading acquisition is not natural. Wren (2003, p. 2) claims that 'merely immersing a child in a literature-rich environment is not all sufficient to guarantee the development of substantial literacy skills'.

2-Children will eventually learn to read if they are given enough time.

This belief is true in a way, but giving enough time alone does not work in the process of learning reading. Children should also be guided by teachers who use well-designed instructional methods. Another point Wren (2003) highlights is that in the case of a first grade child who has poor literacy skills and another first grade child who has well developed literacy skills in the same classroom, the literacy gap between two gets wider unless an effective teacher helps the child with poor reading skills.

3-Reading programs are successful.

Reading programs might be sufficient to solve schools' literacy problems. However, there is no reading program that guarantees all children to reach to advanced levels of reading skills. Every child is different and reading instruction methods should be differentiated according to their individual needs. Wren (2003) claims that the success of any reading program depends on the knowledge and skill of the teacher who uses the program.

4-We used to do a better job of teaching children to read.

It is believed that teaching reading to children used to be better in old days. This is a misbelief as well. For example, the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that the performance of students aged 9, 13 and 17 have not changed over 30 years in the USA (cited in Wren, 2003, p. 4). The things changed are the demand for literacy and the usage of technology in education.

5-Skilled reading involves using syntactic and semantic cues to guess words, and good readers make many mistakes as they read authentic text. The idea here that good readers benefit from context cues to guess up-coming words

while they are reading a text. The idea based on the assessment tool of reading strategies which is called “Miscue Analysis” which created by Ken Goodman. He is one of the leading advocates of whole language method. He (1969) claims that three cues systems underlay the reading process. Those cuing systems are as follows:

- Grapho/phonetic – the relationship of letters to sound system
- Syntactic – the syntax/grammar system
- Semantic – the meaning system

In order to disprove the idea Goodman claims, Wren (2003) claims that the semantic and syntactic cues are significant for understanding of written texts, but they do not have a significant impact in decoding or identifying words. Good readers do not depend on semantic or syntax.

6-Research can be used to support whatever your beliefs are – lots of programs are research based.

According to Wren (2003), if a theory is claimed in only one research, this is not enough to make the theory to be accepted. In contrast, public tends to accept exceptional claims while ignoring strong evidence.

7-Phoneme awareness is a consequence (not a cause) of reading acquisition.

Some claim that teaching to enhance phoneme awareness is not necessary and children enhance phoneme awareness while they learn to read. They also claim that phoneme awareness is a result of reading acquisition, not a cause of it. In contrast, according to Wren (2003), children who are taught to develop phoneme awareness are more possibly to develop good word decoding skills than children who are not taught to develop phoneme awareness.

8-Some people are just genetically dyslexic.

Dyslexia basically means difficulty with words. Today, the people who fail to learn to read are called dyslexic, but the failure of those in reading needs to be another reasons. For Wren (2003), the only reason for the failure in reading is not the genetic factors, but also environmental factors exist. For him, good reading instruction methods can overcome the factors that children who fail to learn to read are affected.

9-Short-term tutoring for struggling readers can get them caught up with their peers, and the gains will be sustained.

Studies show that when a child pulls out of the classroom for intensive, short, one-on-one instruction sessions, he/she might benefit from those sessions, but the gains are not sustained. When he/she goes back to that classroom, he/she continue to fail to thrive (Wren, 2003).

10-If it is in the curriculum, then the children will learn it, and a balanced reading curriculum is ideal.

Putting a concept in a curriculum and teaching it do not guarantee that

every child will learn it.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The best way to teach children to read has been highly controversial issue across the world. The advocates of both whole language method and phoneme based method claim that the best reading instruction method is the one they accept. The debates about the issue are run across the world, especially English speaking countries. For example, Chall (1967) in the USA used the concept of 'the great debate' in her book's title. Later, the concept of the great debate has been commonly preferred to define the debate between advocates of two approaches.

On the other hand, some researchers claim that a common ground should be found between two approaches. For example, Adams (1990) reports that phonics instruction is not all sufficient alone, children should also gain comprehension skills. The idea of finding a common ground led to appear a new concept in reading instruction which is called 'balanced reading'.

As stated above, Turkish educational authorities changed the curriculum in 2004 and they also changed the reading instruction method. One of the reason they have for this changing is that phoneme based method is appropriate for the structure of Turkish language (MEB, 2004). Because, every letter in Turkish has one sound and the sounds of the letters do not ever change in any case. In other words, Turkish is a language that is read as it is written. When a child is taught phonics and letters of Turkish first, he/she is more likely to make connections between written and spoken language and to learn to read more easily. Sahin (2006) examines both methods in a longitudinal study and he reports that the children who are taught to read with whole language method read more fluently, but less comprehend than the children who are taught with phoneme based approach. In addition, he reports that first grade teachers in Turkey do not get used to phoneme based method, but they believe that it is beneficial for children. In another research (Kotaman et al., 2007), it is worth to note that elementary teachers in Turkey think that the infrastructure of Turkish education system is not ready for phoneme based approach. They state that the method was imported from the USA or European Union while ignoring the lack of educational materials, playgrounds, and workshops and so on which are necessary to implement the method sufficiently. This is the mostly repeated statement which the Turkish education system does wrong that the new educational ideas and practices are directly imported from developed countries without making the conditions ready in order to implement them. It may be a good policy to use good, experienced practices, but social, cultural and economic differences should also be taken into account.

In addition, the success of phoneme based method even in the USA is debatable. According to results of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the performance levels of students in the USA have not changed substantially over 30 years although both phoneme based and whole language methods have been implemented during this period (cited in Wren, 2003, p. 4).

In this paper, it is tried to get an overview about reading instruction methods currently in use across the world by focussing on Turkish context. It is seen that there is no evidence that proves one single reading instruction method is the best and meets all individuals' needs. They all have advantages and disadvantages, so it may be useful to differentiate them according to children's individual conditions.

In this paper, additionally, misconceptions about reading instruction are investigated from Wren's (2003) point of view. Because, people really have damaging misbeliefs and myths about reading instruction and those have a big impact on people's understanding of the process of reading acquisition. To conclude, it is worth to note that any reading instruction method itself cannot guarantee the children to reach advanced level of reading skills without highly qualified, effective, diagnostic reading teachers.

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