BELIEF, PRACTICES, AND CHALLENGES OF PAKISTANI PRIMARY GRADE GOVERNMENT SCHOOL TEACHERS: VARIABLE ANALYSIS AFFECTING PRONUNCIATION AND PHONICS TEACHING

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Received on 13th January 2021, Revised on 17th February 2021, Published on 4th March 2021

Abstract

Purpose: This research explores the role of different variables that can impact the beliefs and practices of Pakistani primary grade government school teachers and the challenges they face related to phonics teaching.

Method: Data was collected through a Likert scale-based questionnaire divided into three sections from 230 male and female government school teachers from Multan, Pakistan, and analyzed through a chi-square test to find the association between dependent and independent variables.

Main Findings: The findings highlighted gender as the most significant variable impacting the beliefs and practices of teachers, whereas Professional and academic qualification and teaching experience were statistically non-significant factors. Overall, the teachers display a positive representation of their beliefs and practices, but discrepancy was found in their demographics and practices.

Application of the Study: Regarding challenges, teachers opinionated the genuine problems of lack of proficiency in phonics skills due to its complexity and insufficient training. Based on these findings, extensive content-based pre-and in-service teacher training programs, teachers' knowledge assessments, and classroom observations are recommended.

The Originality of the Study: According to the researcher's knowledge, the research gap of the present study is contemporary and innovative, i.e., there needs to be more significant work done on Variable Analysis affecting pronunciation and phonics teaching.

Keywords: Teacher Beliefs, Teacher Practices, Pronunciation Teaching, Phonics Teaching, Primary Grade Teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Gilakjani and Sabouri (2017) state that beliefs direct the teachers to accept their pedagogic plans for handling their instruction tasks and decide about language learners' learning context, language competence, and motivation. Cabaroğlu and Roberts (2000) define "beliefs as conceptual portrayals that signal a reality, truth, or trustworthiness to its holder to ensure reliance upon it as a guide to personal thought and action." Haney, Lumpe, and Czerniak (1996) and Khader (2012) define beliefs as the teachers' opinions and interpretations of the pedagogic process. Understanding of teachers' cognitions, methodologies of teaching, and learning to instruct can be realized by teachers' beliefs that can be included in teacher education to help them develop their principles and thoughts (Zheng, 2009). Xu (2012) represented that beliefs impact the teachers' understanding of new information and its acceptance or rejection. Similarly, a significant role is played by beliefs in teachers’ teaching practices and their professional competence. Amirvousefi (2015) stressed that teachers' beliefs are practically realized in their actions, showing a relationship between teachers' beliefs and their practices.

Johnson (1994), Phillips and Borg (2009), and Abdi and Asadi (2015) believe that a person's education and experience shape his/her beliefs about learning and teaching. Calderhead (1996) categorizes teachers' beliefs into five main types, i.e., a) curriculum, b) pedagogy, c) students and learning, d) learning to instruct, and e) the nature of instruction and the self; all these categories are interlinked. Richards (1998) explain that teachers' belief systems consist of their information, theories, values, views, expectations, and thoughts about teaching-learning situation constructed over time, which they always have with them in the teaching situations. Similarly, Green (1971), Pajares (1992), and Abdi and Asadi (2015) divide beliefs into core and peripheral beliefs. Core beliefs are permanent and exercise a more robust effect on behavior than peripheral beliefs. Kindsvatter et al. (1989) and Abdi and Asadi (2015) state that the foundations of teachers' beliefs are rooted in the following:

1) The language learning experience of teachers as young learners.
2) Experience from teaching a particular method/approach employed for a definite group of students.
3) Preference for any specific approach/method of teaching corresponding to the teachers' personality and their character.
4) Pedagogy or research-based ideologies related to second language acquisition (SLA) grounded in psychology or educational schools of thought.

After explaining the nature and sources of teachers' beliefs, it is imperpertent to establish a relationship between the beliefs and practices of teachers that is elaborated by Johnson (1992), Attardo and Brown (2005), Poyner (2005), Jones and Fong (2007) who explained how instructors formed teacher-centred, textbook-based, and grammar-oriented teaching beliefs based on their own experience; Algozzine et al. (2012) co-related the more or less teaching experience as a basis of believing that teaching grammatical skill or oral proficiency is more important for learners. Burns (1992), Jiménez and O’Shanahan (2016), and Taimalu and Luik (2019) have also probed into the connection between the beliefs of teachers and their teaching practices.

For teaching pronunciation through phonics at the primary level, teachers' role becomes significant not only as facilitators of the learning process and diagnostic analyzers (Morley, 1991) but also as knowledge mediators (Yates & Zielinski, 2009); hence, their behaviors and management styles (Hosseini & Rahimi, 2015), their personality traits and impact on classroom practices (Arif et al., 2012) and beliefs become highly relevant factors. At the primary level, pronunciation teaching is usually realized through phonics teaching to inculcate the sound patterns of the target language corresponding with the letter or letter combinations termed grapheme-phoneme correspondence (GPCs) (Moats, 2020). Buckingham (2018) defines phonics as an alternative teaching method in which consonant and vowel sounds are taught first by associating them with written letters and then how they are combined and blended to form words to develop a strong basis of intelligible pronunciation and reading skills of English.

Role of teacher’s beliefs and practices in pronunciation and phonics teaching

The beliefs of teachers, in other words, cognitions of teachers, can be examined or established through the practices of teachers in the classrooms (Szpyra-Kozlowska et al., 2002; Sifakis & Sougari, 2005; Wahid & Sulong, 2013; Czajka, 2014; Fouma, 2015). Buss (2016) surveyed Brazilian EFL instructors to investigate their beliefs and practices towards pronunciation teaching, reporting that, although teachers felt comfortable with pronunciation teaching, they employed traditional teaching methods and emphasized word-level pronunciation alongside the problematic sounds for Brazilian learners. In a similar vein, Szyszka (2016) analyzed the status of pronunciation teaching in the EFL context at primary, lower secondary, and higher secondary classes in Poland to elicit the instructors' opinions about pronunciation, their competency, and instructional methods, unearthing that as compared to primary school teachers, more teachers of secondary school stressed focusing on their pronunciation during pedagogic practice. Czajka (2014) also examined higher secondary school teachers' attitudes and behaviors about pronunciation instruction, where instructors confessed to ignoring pronunciation primarily because of restricted time, inadequacy of pedagogic resources, and "the absence of pronunciation teaching guidelines and clearly defined aims" (p. 185).

From the perspective of phonics instruction, Campbell (2018) stated that in English-speaking countries like the UK, the USA, New Zealand, and Australia, phonics literacy instruction has been one of the most controversially debated areas. By probing into the connection between the teachers' reported play—literacy beliefs, their phonics practices, and the motives behind their opinions for not choosing any commercial program in preschool years, the results realized a correlation between play-based, learner-centered teaching beliefs of teachers, their reported all-inclusive phonics practices in early classrooms and their choices for not using commercial phonics programs. Logistic regression analysis discovered a significantly positive association between pre-schooler instructors' belief that very young learners acquire the letter-sound relationship incidentally and their decision to not utilize the commercial programs. Interview data analyzed through thematic analysis exhibited that the teachers considered phonics teaching as an isolated skill—drill activity and, therefore, maintained strong negative views against laboriously scripted commercial phonics programs. In another large-scale study, Henderson et al. (2015) investigated EFL teachers' beliefs about English pronunciation instruction in Finland, Switzerland, Sweden, Spain, Poland, Germany, Netherlands, Ireland, and Macedonia, realizing insufficient training of teachers in the domain of pronunciation, in general, positive self-assessment of their pronunciation competence from the perspective of instructors and little ambitions on the part of the learners to have a native-like accent.

Need to investigate Pakistani primary-grade teachers' phonics-related beliefs and practices

In the Pakistani context, the governmental policy to introduce phonics at the primary level in 2015-2016 required extensive training for teachers and the provision of teaching aids to effectively change pronunciation skills, i.e., phonological and phonemic awareness of English. Majoka, Khan, and Khan (2016) investigated the pronunciation teaching practices of Government school teachers in the Swabi district and found it to be the missing link between the syllabus implementation and students' performance. Only a few primary teachers are given training only once a year for a very short period, i.e., 7-15 days, and it is challenging for them to master the sounds as many of them are quite old and many of them do not hold
Masters degree in English; their outdated professional qualification, e.g., *CT, **PTC, ***B. Ed\(^1\) (Farah, Fauzee & Daud, 2014) have never trained them to teach phonics systematically. Moreover, their training sessions have focused on pronunciation from the perspective of English phonology instead of introducing them to pronunciation in terms of phonics and phonemic awareness skill, which is the correspondence between the graphemes and phonemes; that is the fundamental flaw in government teacher training programs that they do not focus extensively on the content-based training that is required to teach the learners at the primary grades. So, it is significant to probe into the beliefs and practices of Pakistani primary-level government school teachers to provide feedback on the whole pedagogic policy, teacher training programs, and problems in achieving student learning outcomes (SLOs). The following questions are formulated to address the issue:

1. What are the beliefs and practices of Pakistani primary-level state school teachers towards pronunciation/phonics teaching?
2. How far do different teachers' variables affect beliefs and practices related to pronunciation/phonics teaching?
3. What challenges do teachers face while teaching pronunciation/phonics in government schools?

**METHODOLOGY**

The tool for collecting data from the state-run primary-level teachers was a self-administered Likert scale-based questionnaire survey divided into three sections, filled from 230 primary-level male (n=115) and female (n=115) teachers of different government schools of the Multan district. In the first section, they were inquired about their beliefs (attitude and perception) related to different aspects of pronunciation and phonics teaching through 21 statements. The statistical reliability of this section on SPSS was 0.92, which lies in the excellent reliability value of Cronbach Alpha. For the analysis of actual practices related to phonics teaching in the classroom, 11 statements were put forward in section 2 that realized the value of 0.89 on reliability statistics of Cronbach Alpha. In the third section, they were given different options to express their opinions about the reasons to teach phonics and the problems in teaching phonics in state schools.

For the questionnaire analysis, descriptive statistics was used to calculate the percentages of each statement's answers. Moreover, the chi-square test was used to explore the impact and association of significant variables on the beliefs and practices of teachers.

**DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS**

**Descriptive analysis of demographics**

The questionnaire was divided into three sections filled by 230 government school primary teachers. The demographic variables were asked to determine the effect of different variables on the beliefs and practices of teacher participants. The demographic variables included gender, age, educational level, professional qualification, teaching experience, status of employment, monthly income, phonics/pronunciation training during academic or professional career, and time allocated to phonics teaching.

Figure 1 shows teacher participants' personal demographics as most participants were either younger or middle-aged with 1-20 years of experience; most of them were teaching at the primary level for quite an extended period. Although most of them held MA qualifications, their specialization was not a Masters in English. Almost all the teachers held some professional qualification, and most had job security as their status was that of a permanent employee, with the majority earning less than 50,000/month.

Figure 2 above illustrates the demographics related to teacher training and their classroom practices. It was realized that only a few teachers were knowledgeable in pronunciation, as only a few received extensive training during academic or professional careers. Surprisingly, none of the participants was trained in phonics, and consequently, most teachers reported allocating insufficient time to phonics teaching at the primary level. To improve their proficiency in phonics and pronunciation, a comparatively lesser number of teachers got help from any digital resource or the teacher guide provided by the government.

\(^1\) *CT: Certificate of Teaching, **PTC: Primary Teaching Certificate, ***B.Ed: Bachelor of Education
Figure 1: Personal demographics of teacher participants

Figure 2: Demographics related to teacher training and their practices
Beliefs of teachers about phonics skill

This section analyses the beliefs of teachers about phonics skills through 21 questions. Teachers' beliefs affect what they accomplish in their classroom, their attitudes, and their learners' beliefs. They guide teachers in choosing their teaching strategies for coping with their teaching challenges and shape language learners' learning environment, their motivation, and their language ability (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017). In this section, the beliefs address different aspects, which are analyzed through frequency and percentages to show the tendency of participants' responses.

a) Q 1, 2, 6, and 14 are related to perceptions of teachers towards phonics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I like teaching English phonics.</td>
<td>4(1.74%)</td>
<td>13(5.65%)</td>
<td>41(17.83%)</td>
<td>112(48.70%)</td>
<td>60(26.09%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Teaching phonics is a difficult job.</td>
<td>13(5.65%)</td>
<td>18(7.83%)</td>
<td>77(33.48%)</td>
<td>93(40.43%)</td>
<td>29(12.61%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>I do not have the basic knowledge of phonics to teach it; therefore, I do not focus on it.</td>
<td>14(6.09%)</td>
<td>43(18.70%)</td>
<td>72(31.30%)</td>
<td>87(37.83%)</td>
<td>14(6.09%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Phonics teaching is a time-consuming job.</td>
<td>5(2.17%)</td>
<td>23(10.00%)</td>
<td>50(21.74%)</td>
<td>110(47.83%)</td>
<td>42(18.26%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b) The second aspect of teachers' beliefs is related to learner's capacities elicited through Q. 3, 4, 13, 17, 18, and 19:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I think students will learn phonics better later in their academic careers.</td>
<td>14(6.09%)</td>
<td>21(9.13%)</td>
<td>63(27.39%)</td>
<td>96(41.74%)</td>
<td>36(15.65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>The mother tongue of students influences their knowledge of English phonics.</td>
<td>13(5.65%)</td>
<td>21(9.13%)</td>
<td>55(23.91%)</td>
<td>94(40.87%)</td>
<td>47(20.43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Learners can perform better even if they do not learn phonics.</td>
<td>13(5.65%)</td>
<td>38(16.52%)</td>
<td>67(29.13%)</td>
<td>87(37.83%)</td>
<td>25(10.87%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Phonics does not play any role in learning to read at the primary level.</td>
<td>16(6.96%)</td>
<td>58(25.22%)</td>
<td>63(27.39%)</td>
<td>65(28.26%)</td>
<td>28(12.17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>The home environment of government school children does not support computer-based learning.</td>
<td>12(5.22%)</td>
<td>20(8.70%)</td>
<td>60(26.09%)</td>
<td>90(39.13%)</td>
<td>48(20.87%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>The mental capacity of government school students is not suitable for computer-based learning.</td>
<td>29(12.61%)</td>
<td>39(16.96%)</td>
<td>60(26.09%)</td>
<td>80(34.78%)</td>
<td>31(13.48%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

c) The third aspect of teachers' beliefs is related to phonics content presented in textbooks through Q. 7, 8, and 9:

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>The activities given in the textbooks about phonic exercises need to be clarified.</td>
<td>14(6.09%)</td>
<td>60(26.09%)</td>
<td>74(32.17%)</td>
<td>56(24.35%)</td>
<td>26(11.30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>I go through all the topics of phonics given in the textbooks very thoroughly.</td>
<td>9(3.91%)</td>
<td>24(10.43%)</td>
<td>63(27.39%)</td>
<td>104(45.22%)</td>
<td>30(13.04%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The activities of phonics given in the textbooks could be more practical.</td>
<td>18(7.83%)</td>
<td>57(24.78%)</td>
<td>71(30.87%)</td>
<td>66(28.70%)</td>
<td>18(7.83%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

d) The fourth aspect is connected with the relation of phonics with the other primary four skills probed through 12 and 15:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Teaching other skills takes so much time that I need more time to teach phonics.</td>
<td>13(5.65%)</td>
<td>34(14.78%)</td>
<td>54(23.48%)</td>
<td>108(46.96%)</td>
<td>21(9.13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Teaching Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening skills are more critical than phonics.</td>
<td>10(4.35%)</td>
<td>20(8.70%)</td>
<td>66(28.70%)</td>
<td>87(37.83%)</td>
<td>47(20.43%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
e) The fifth aspect is related to the phonics assessment scheme asked through Q. 10:

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Phonics is not tested in the exams; therefore, I do not focus on it.</td>
<td>30(13.04%)</td>
<td>45(19.57%)</td>
<td>74(32.17%)</td>
<td>62(26.96%)</td>
<td>19(8.26%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

f) The sixth aspect is associated with classroom and school settings elicited through Q 5, 11, and 16.

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I can focus on phonics teaching if the class size is small.</td>
<td>9(3.91%)</td>
<td>11(4.78%)</td>
<td>59(25.65%)</td>
<td>99(43.04%)</td>
<td>52(22.61%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>I do not have any facilities in the classroom to teach phonics.</td>
<td>15(6.52%)</td>
<td>41(17.83%)</td>
<td>61(26.52%)</td>
<td>80(34.78%)</td>
<td>33(14.35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>I think phonics teaching can be better managed in the private school sector.</td>
<td>18(7.83%)</td>
<td>32(13.91%)</td>
<td>60(26.09%)</td>
<td>87(37.83%)</td>
<td>33(14.35%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

g) The seventh and last aspect of teachers' beliefs is related to computer-based phonics teaching methodology inquired through Q. 20 and 21.

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Teaching government school learners through traditional methods (e.g., teacher-centered, focus on books, drilling, writing, etc.) is easier than teaching through technology.</td>
<td>23(10.00%)</td>
<td>33(14.35%)</td>
<td>71(30.87%)</td>
<td>86(37.39%)</td>
<td>17(7.39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>I want to focus on this skill if I am provided with the facilities to teach phonics through computers.</td>
<td>2(0.87%)</td>
<td>14(6.09%)</td>
<td>35(15.22%)</td>
<td>117(50.87%)</td>
<td>62(26.96%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Practices of government school teachers regarding pronunciation and phonics skill**

Section 2 of the questionnaire was related to the practices of government school teachers from the perspectives of pronunciation and phonics skills at the primary level. If the questions are analyzed, Q.1 realized that most teachers preferred teaching phonics through textbook activities; as in Q. 10, most said computer-based teaching was difficult. However, they claimed on the contrary that they explored computer resources to learn about activities of phonics in Q.3. Apart from getting help from digital resources for teaching, Q. 2, 3, 4, and 5 elicited about teachers' current practices for teaching phonics whether they increased their competence of phonics, designed activities and made flashcards for its teaching. Their assertion of designing activities and making sound/flash cards could also not be validated by observing classrooms. While getting the questionnaire filled out by other teachers, no visual aids were visible. Moreover, in demographics, most of them stated allocating either no time or just 20 minutes/week out of a total 220 minutes of English lessons for phonics teaching that realized very short and insufficient time for conducting any creative activity at the primary level. Q 11 focused on the easy practice of teaching phonics through the whole word method that can be validated by assessing the primary grade students as they can spell the whole word instead of segmenting and blending the individual sounds. Q. 6, 7, and 9 are related to personal aspects of teachers' personalities that affect their practices, i.e., age, shyness, and influence of L1 while uttering sounds. Although a majority of teachers also agreed with these statements, age and shyness were less valued as compared to the impact of L1. Lack of professional training hampering the competence of pronunciation was explored in Q.8 that could be corroborated when 65 teachers reported having no pronunciation-based professional training and 105 teachers had 1-15 days of training once in their professional life; almost 66% of teachers either never studied pronunciation or for less than a month during their academic career. Ironically, none of the teachers received any phonics-based training.

**Impact of variables on beliefs and practices of teachers**

The beliefs and practices of teachers might be affected by different variables, somehow or other. In Table 2, gender as a variable is analyzed through a chi-square test to find its association with the beliefs and practices of government school teachers.

**Table 2:** Association of Gender with Beliefs and Practices of Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Variables/Statements related to beliefs</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Sig***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like teaching English phonics.</td>
<td>15.785</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>SIG***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teaching phonics is a difficult job. 11.134 0.025 sig**,sig*
I think students will learn phonics better later in their academic careers. 7.630 0.106 sig**,sig*
The mother tongue of students influences their knowledge of English phonics. 18.590 0.001 Sig***, sig**,sig*
I can focus on phonics teaching if the class size is small. 22.078 0.000 Sig***, sig**,sig*
I do not have the basic knowledge of phonics to teach it; therefore, I do not focus on it. 14.790 0.005 Sig***, sig**,sig*
The activities given in the textbooks about phonics exercises need to be clarified. 16.224 0.003 Sig***, sig**,sig*
I go through all the topics of phonics given in the textbooks very thoroughly. 8.050 0.090 sig*
The activities of phonics given in the textbooks could be more practical. 10.886 0.028 sig**,sig*
Phonics is not tested in the exams; therefore, I do not focus on it. 27.265 0.000 Sig***, sig**,sig*
I do not have any facilities in the classroom to teach phonics. 9.156 0.057 sig*
Teaching other skills takes so much time that I do not find enough time to teach phonics. 3.067 0.547 L
Learners can perform better even if they do not learn phonics. 4.843 0.304
Phonics teaching is a time taking job. 10.283 0.036 sig**,sig*
Teaching Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening skills are more critical than phonics. 37.164 0.000 Sig***, sig**,sig*
Phonics teaching can be better managed in the private school sector. 21.134 0.000 Sig***, sig**,sig*
Phonics does not play any role in learning to read at the primary level. 25.320 0.000 Sig***, sig**,sig*
The home environment of government school children does not support computer-based learning. 13.501 0.009 Sig***, sig**,sig*
The mental capacity of government school students is not suitable for computer-based learning. 31.024 0.000 Sig***, sig**,sig*
Teaching government school learners through traditional methods (e.g., teacher-centered, focus on books, drilling, writing, etc.) is easier than teaching through technology. 16.445 0.002 Sig***, sig**,sig*
I would like to focus on this skill if I am provided with the facilities to teach phonics through computers. 7.544 0.056 sig*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables/Statements Related to Practices</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I prefer teaching phonics through activities given in the textbooks than computer/software/website.</td>
<td>8.787</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>sig*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In my spare time, I explore phonics concepts to develop my competence.</td>
<td>46.650</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Sig***, sig**,sig*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have explored web/computer resources to learn about activities of phonics.</td>
<td>24.891</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Sig***, sig**,sig*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have made sound cards/flashcards to teach phonics.</td>
<td>31.078</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Sig***, sig**,sig*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I make efforts to teach phonics by designing my activities.</td>
<td>23.371</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Sig***, sig**,sig*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am shy to produce and practice sounds in front of learners.</td>
<td>17.327</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>Sig***, sig**,sig*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am too old to learn and practice phonics.</td>
<td>46.154</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Sig***, sig**,sig*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional training by school/government is not offered frequently, so I cannot develop competence in phonics.</td>
<td>10.419</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>sig**,sig*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My mother tongue hampers me to utter the sounds of English correctly.</td>
<td>6.130</td>
<td>0.190</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I am not comfortable/find it difficult to use computer software/programs for phonics teaching. 8.316 0.081 sig*

It is easier to teach the whole word than individual sounds, so I do not teach individual sounds in English. 19.006 0.001 Sig***, sig***, sig*

Table 2 shows that beliefs and practices are strongly influenced by gender. Age was found to be a significant variable only in a few variables, as shown in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>24.431</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>sig*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.570</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>Sig***, sig**, sig*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.136</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>sig*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>22.531</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>sig**, sig*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.769</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>sig**, sig*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>25.720</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>sig**, sig*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>19.244</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td>sig*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>24.485</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>sig**, sig*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whereas Professional and academic qualifications and teaching Experience at the primary level are all non-significant.

**Teachers’ views about reasons for phonics instruction and the challenges in government school context**

In the third section of the questionnaire, teachers were asked to give their opinions about reasons for teaching phonics and challenges they come across in its instruction. Out of 690 answers for each category classified into six significant reasons, the three most frequent responses delineated the top three prioritized reasons for teaching phonics as follows: It helps in a) word formation, b) improves reading, and c) pronunciation skill. Its significance in building vocabulary, boosting confidence, and due to the importance of the English language were slightly given less weightage. The opinions of teachers realize that they understand its significance and its relation to other significant skills.

**Figure 3: Opinions of teachers regarding primary reasons for phonics teaching**

Regarding challenges in phonics teaching, most teachers opine that many rules of phonics are hard to learn, conceptualize, and explain to the learners. Secondly, they need extensive content-based training, increasing the strain of pronunciation/phonics pedagogy. Thirdly, they consider it a time and effort-consuming job, needing help managing their workload. The obstacles stated by the teachers are genuine; they consider it a time-consuming task and start ignoring it and refrain from developing self-competence through available resources. For this, they need rigorous training and motivation before teaching phonics content to learners. 5% and 3% of respondents realized the lack of facilities and absence of technology as contributing factors for teaching phonics; Only 1% of respondents considered phonics not challenging.
Figure 4: Opinions of teachers regarding challenges in phonics teaching

Based on these opinions, most teachers' opinions are very relevant to the significance of phonics teaching for teachers and learners and the challenges they come across in the government school context. All they need is training and exposure to phonics content in its actual letter and spirit, and supplemental digital tools can be excellent resources in this scenario.

DISCUSSION

What teachers believe can be estimated through their practices (Amiryousefi, 2015). More teachers consider phonics a difficult and time-consuming job and require more facilities and smaller class sizes to teach it in their regular setting. More participants believe that government school learners' mother tongue, home environment, and mental capacity impact phonics teaching and do not support digitally supported-based learning. They have mixed opinions about the clarity and practicality of textbook activities and phonics assessment schemes (Czajka, 2014; Abdi & Asadi, 2015). They also show a mixed trend of agreeing, disagreeing, and being neutral in terms of the importance of phonics at the primary level in learning to read and its impact on learners' performance, inferring them to believe that phonics skills can be learned later in the academic career. When these beliefs are compared with their practices, it becomes evident that the teachers, despite considering phonics a critical aspect, used the alphabetic method to teach letters (Jones & Fong, 2007; Tergujeff, 2012; Buss, 2016; Bai & Yuan; 2019) and did not put efforts to maximize their learners’ proficiency in phonics skill. To encapsulate the findings, it was found that some of the claims could not match the actual practices (Jiménez & O’Shanahan, 2016; Taimalu & Luik, 2019), and some could be substantiated with the demographic information. However, it can be perceived that the majority of the teachers present a positive image of their practices carried out in the classroom. The analysis of all these variables entails that teachers earning less are young, academically and professionally more qualified, more knowledgeable, and more enthusiastic than older, more experienced with more salaries but less qualified, less knowledgeable, and less energetic teachers; hence, for placement of primary level teachers in government sector schools, these variables should be considered.

When teachers were elicited about their opinions in terms of the challenges of teaching phonics, they exhibited that although phonics is an important skill related to reading and oral communication skills, they were unable to handle it properly due to a lack of training and being overburdened by their routine schedules (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2018).
CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Gilakjani and Rahimy (2019) consider the role of the teacher to be very significant as from the dispenser of information, their role may shift to the facilitator of information in the context of 21st-century education, making the beliefs, classroom practices, and skills of teachers relevant (Nguyen et al., 2021). Gyasi (2017) also put forward that the learning environment of the private sector and state-run schools can also impact the pronunciation skills of school-level learners in a foreign language learning context. Similarly, teachers must be trained to teach pronunciation and phonics proficiently in Pakistani government schools. Moreover, the government school teachers try to overvalue their practices to hide this incompetence and display more positive beliefs. However, they still employ alphabetic and whole-word methods to teach spelling. To overcome the challenges, digital tools for teachers and learners are strongly recommended as these would not only increase the proficiency of learners and teachers but also help to manage the large classes by motivating the learners to engage in practical activities without making much effort (Ryba & Anderson, 1990; Mollaei & Riasati, 2013). The benefits of teaching phonics and pronunciation through digital tools for teachers include: a) it can increase the knowledge of the teacher; b) it can make teaching content effective; and c) it can help manage time and large classes (Gilakjani, 2017). The pre-and in-service teacher induction programs should be more content-oriented, and the assessment of teacher knowledge should be made before teacher induction programs. Teachers’ in-class observations should be regularly conducted to evaluate whether the teachers are delivering the phonics textbook content appropriately or not, whether their classroom practices realize their preference for the alphabetic method or phonics method, and whether teachers are prepared and willing to teach phonics skill in actual letter and spirit. Technological infrastructure and support should be provided to the teachers by setting up computer labs, and providing appropriate phonics software access to teachers’ cell phones for teaching and assessing the learners through oral practice.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

Due to limited resources and consent issues, a small sample size of 230 primary grade teachers (N= 115 male, 115 female) from different government schools in district Multan (Punjab) was chosen, and this may not be a representative group of the whole province. For future study, an ethnographic study in connection with teachers’ attitudes towards teacher training and their pedagogical practices needs to be conducted because this may provide a keen insight into this regard, which the researcher of the current study may have yet to witness. Therefore, ethnographic research is an excellent alternative methodology to substantiate, enhance, or suggest new aspects of the phenomena under study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND ETHICAL STANDARDS

We declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper with any organization, and no unethical practices were followed during the study. The consent of participants was sought, and their anonymity was ensured.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We extend our heartfelt thanks to all of the participant teachers in our study, who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights with us. Their willingness to engage with our research was essential to the success of this project, and we are deeply grateful for their participation.

AUTHOR’S CONTRIBUTION

Sadia Malik constructed the main idea for the research, planned the methodology to conclude, collected data, and wrote the manuscript.

Dr Uzma Sadiq contributed to the design and implementation of the research, the analysis of the results, and the editing and proofreading of the manuscript.

Dr Javeris took responsibility for statistical analysis, logical interpretation, and presentation of the results in tabular format.

REFERENCES


