EFL STUDENT TECHERS' COGNITION ABOUT READING INSTRUCTION

Dr. Mohamed El-Okda
mohokda@yahoo.com
mokda@squ.edu.om

Abstract

_____

The study of teachers' and student teachers' cognition about foreign language teaching is a recent trend in research. Given the paucity of studies of teachers' and student teachers' tacit beliefs about reading instruction, the present study constitutes an attempt to shed some light on EFL student teachers' thinking about it. A belief elicitation instrument consisting of three vignettes each dealing with a problematic situation related to teaching the reading skill to foreign language learners was deigned. Fifty-seven student teachers of English at Sultan Qaboos University were then required to select and/ or spell out their initial practical arguments either for or against the set of decisions made by the teacher involved in each vignette. Selected practical arguments were analyzed quantitatively and self-initiated ones were analyzed qualitatively. Implicit beliefs about teaching reading were then discussed. Implications of the findings of this study in teacher education are highlighted and recommendations for further research are made.

_____

Introduction

The study of teacher cognition is currently viewed by many educational researchers (Al-Touby, 2002, Calderhead, 1995, Woods, 1995) as a paradigm shift in research on teaching. Earlier educational researchers aimed at establishing a causal or a correlational relationship between specific teaching behaviors and learning outcomes. Teacher education seemed to be primarily concerned with distilling the findings of this type of research and transmitting them to student teachers. More recently, teacher educators began to realize that educational courses based on the transmission of both knowledge of theory of education as well as research findings are not the main determinants of teacher behavior in class. The gap between theory and practice is getting wider and wider in education in general and language teaching in particular. The chief determinant of teacher behavior in class is his/ her theory-in-action commonly defined as the set of tacit beliefs and values about what constitutes effective foreign language teaching and learning. This theory-in-action is formed throughout the teacher's experience as a learner.

It follows, then, that teachers' and student teachers' tacit beliefs about teaching and learning constitute the main component of the knowledge base of teaching En glish as a foreign language. Indeed, student teachers of English as a foreign language come to their ELT Curriculum and Methodology courses as well as other educational courses with their pre-existing theory-in-action. Unless these tacit beliefs are uncovered, student teachers of English will continue to teach in the same

way as they were taught. Implied in this line of thought is the assumption that such tacit beliefs are changeable despite the fact that they are not easily accessible. Elsewhere (El-Okda, 1998), the present researcher argues that those beliefs can act as a filter that shapes student teachers' interpretation of theory. They also function as blinkers that do not allow teachers and student teachers to see any other viable alternative route inside the classroom. That is why many teacher educators at the moment argue that the major function of received educational knowledge lies in its use in improving practical arguments in an attempt to change those tacit beliefs. Uncovering those tacit beliefs, therefore, is a pre-requisite to making language teacher preparation programs more effective.

Many researchers have attempted to investigate foreign or second language teachers' tacit beliefs about teaching (see for example: Al-Shabibi, 2004, Breen, 2001, Gahin, 2000). To the best knowledge of the present writer, no studies have focused exclusively on foreign language student teachers' beliefs about teaching reading. The present study is a preliminary attempt to do just this.

Problem of the Study

Given the paucity of research on foreign language student teachers' tacit beliefs about teaching reading and the importance of investigating their beliefs about teaching this important skill, the present study aimed at exploring EFL student teachers' beliefs about teaching important skill. The problem of the study was reformulated in terms of the following question:

What are EFL student teachers beliefs about teaching reading that they bring to their methodology courses?

To answer this question an attempt will first be made to characterize student teachers' tacit beliefs about teaching and a brief account of how the elicitation instrument was designed will be given. The sample of the present study consisted of 57 student teachers of English at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in the sixth semester of their teacher preparation program. Twelve of them were males and 45 were females. All of them were expected to take their first English Teaching Methods course during the seventh semester. The aim was to make sure that student teachers' practical arguments would not be contaminated by their EFL Teaching Methods courses.

Knowledge Base of Teaching

In her review of research on domain specific knowledge of teaching, Carter (1990) identifies two main categories, i.e. practical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. Practical knowledge seems to refer to the tacit beliefs, values and understandings of teachers that determine the decisions they make and the actions they perform when they are actually teaching. This is precisely what was referred to above as teachers' theory of action (Schon (1983). It is given different labels by different people such as 'practical theory' (Marland, 1998) and "personal practical theory" (Carter, 1992). Such category of teaching knowledge is not propositional. It cannot be spelt out by teachers, but can only be inferred from teaching acts, practical arguments and metaphors. Carter (1990: 300) adds that:

> "…practical knowledge is shaped by a professional's personal history, which includes intentions and purposes, as well as the cumulative effects of life experience ……"

Carter (1992: 110-112) further asserts that teacher' practical knowledge is personal, experiential, contextualized, task-specific and event-structured.

On the other hand, "….. pedagogical content knowledge is a domain distinct from, but not unrelated to, practical knowledge (Carter, 1990:307)." Shulman (1987:15) points out that:

> "…the key to distinguishing the knowledge base of teaching lies at the interaction of content and pedagogy, in the capacity of the teacher to transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students."

In other words, this process of transforming expert knowledge to pedagogical content knowledge constitutes an attempt to translate the former into classroom events suitable for a specific group of learners

Whereas Carter believes that teachers' practical theory and pedagogical content knowledge are two distinguishable types of the knowledge base of teaching, other researchers believe that the latter is just one component of the former. In his characterization of teachers' practical theory, Marland (1998) identifies fourteen components of this construct. These include values, beliefs, metaphors and pedagogical content knowledge. However, this controversial issue (See Borg, 2003 and Freeman 2002) is irrelevant to the present study. It is the contention of the present researcher that they are two closely related mental constructs that have led to a tremendous amount of research on teacher cognition.

Implied in this characterization of teaching knowledge is that educational knowledge received from academic educational research is not directly related to practice in teaching. Many educators feel that the relationship between this type of research and practice has to be redefined (Freeman, 1996). The fact that educational research of this sort has failed to become the main, if not the sole, determinant of practice does not mean that it can be disregarded. Indeed, it constitutes a major ingredient of Shulman's notion of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) (Shulman, 1987). Besides, many educators believe that the relationship between knowledge obtained from educational research and practice is not a matter of application, but rather a resource for improving the practical arguments of teachers. Fenstermacher (1986: 45) argues that: "….. the benefit of educational research to educational practice is realized in the improvement of practical arguments, not in programs of…..performance deduced from the findings of research." Practice is changed as a result of modifications or changes in the premises of practical arguments; and findings of research constitute only one of several other bases of appraising and changing the practical arguments in the minds of teachers.

Fenstermacher and Richards (1993 advocate the use of practical reasoning as a way of enabling teachers to discover, modify or change the premises underlying their practical arguments. The premises upon which teachers base their initially elicited practical arguments will, most likely, reveal their tacit beliefs, which constitute their theories of action. Two assumptions underlie this suggestion. One is that teachers' tacit beliefs not only determine their action but also the premises of their practical arguments. The other is that engaging them in practical reasoning is bound to bring those beliefs to the surface. It is a process of reconstructing teachers' practical arguments. This involves the interaction between the teacher and a dialogical partner

known as 'Other'. It is a process which involves the elicitation of teacher beliefs embedded in their practice, the appraisal of the premises initially given by the teacher to support, modify or advance competing alternative premises and then chain these premises to formalize a better practical argument. Therefore, teacher beliefs can be inferred from the initially elicited practical arguments that are provided by teachers or student teachers to justify a certain identifiable behavior in their teaching practice. However, practical reasoning based on classroom observation is simply not available for student teachers at this stage. By the time they get to their teaching practice component of their program, they will have taken their methodology courses. Case and vignette analysis can be used for eliciting practical arguments (Shulman, 1992).

A number of points need to be highlighted with regard to studies of teacher beliefs. First, there is a lot of confusion regarding the concept itself. Sometimes, they are equated with perceptions and attitudes. In such studies, attempts are made to relate beliefs to practice. Calderhead (1995) reports many of these studies in which a discrepancy between teachers' reported opinions (conscious beliefs) and practices are usually observed. This is quite plausible. Teacher behavior, as mentioned earlier, is determined mainly by their tacit beliefs. It is expected that teacher practice will normally be consistent with his/ her tacit beliefs rather than perceptions/ stated beliefs. Second, teacher beliefs, as Calderhead (1995: 719) notes, "tend to be organized in terms of large belief systems. … … The belief systems may contain inconsistencies and may be quite idiosyncratic." Indeed, teachers' tacit belief systems can sometimes include conflicting beliefs. This will become clearer from data analysis of the present study.

Designing the Belief Elicitation Instrument

Calderhead (1995) provides a detailed account of the different methods used in investigating teachers' beliefs. These include simulations, think-aloud commentaries, stimulated recall commentaries, repertory grids, concept mapping, ethnography and case studies and narratives or teacher own accounts of their teaching. Calderrhead (1995: 711) points out "Methods of eliciting the knowledge, beliefs, and thinking of teachers have frequently been borrowed from the fields of cognitive psychology, human problem solving, social anthropology, and the humanities". He discusses the use of vignettes in the study of teachers' tacit beliefs under the umbrella term of simulations. Under simulations, he includes "critical incidents", and " the use of videotaped excerpts of teaching situations". According to Calderhead (1995:711) "These methods are characterized by the use of a contrived problem, situation, or context that often can be manipulated by the researcher and can be used to elicit teachers' thinking about practical teaching situations."

Following Maria Poulou (2001), the vignettes written for the purpose of the present study are short descriptions of specific teaching situations related to the reading skill in which an anonymous hypothetical teacher is faced with a practical problem that requires him/ her to make a set of decisions. Respondents are first required to assess the appropriateness of the set of decisions made by the teacher involved in each vignette. The design of these vignettes was preceded by informal interviews with 8 student teachers coming from different parts of the country. The aim was to identify the most common practices used in literacy instruction, text exploitation in reading lessons and the teaching of prescribed narrative texts. During this phase, student teachers were also asked about the possible reasons underlying those teaching behaviors. An earlier version of this instrument included no reasons or

practical arguments. Student teachers were only asked why they considered the set of decisions made by the teacher described in the vignette right or wrong. Unfortunately, student teachers provided very few reasons in the space left for this purpose. Therefore, it was decided to combine argument selection as well as argument initiation. However, the arguments provided for selection were mainly derived from earlier interviews with those eight student teachers. The decisions included in each vignette were those that interviewees reported to have been frequently used by the teachers who taught them reading. The final version (See Appendix B) was also submitted to a three-member jury interested in the area of teacher beliefs.

Analysis of Data

Each of the three vignettes designed for the purpose of this study ends with a set of decisions related to a particular aspect of teaching reading. The first set of decisions is related to teaching literacy. The second set is related to text exploitation and the third is related to teaching long stories/ novels. First, an attempt is made to examine student teachers' reactions to each situation and the set of decisions related to it. As pointed out earlier, student teachers were required to state whether the decisions taken by the teacher concerned in each situation were right or wrong. Table 1 shows the frequency counts and percentage of those who judged each of these sets of decisions as right as opposed to those who considered it wrong. Chi Square test was used to find out whether there is a statistically significant difference in each case.

Student Teachers' Reactions to the Three Sets of Decisions

Table 1: Student teachers' reactions to the three sets of decisions

	Decision 1		Decision 2		Decision 3	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Right	51	89.5%	55	96.5%	27	47.4%
Wrong	6	10.5%	2	3.5%	30	52.6%
Total	57	100.0%	57	100.0%	57	100.0%
χ^2	35.526**		49.281**		.158	

** significant at the level of .01, * significant at the level of .05

The majority of student teachers (51 out of 57) constituting 89.5% of the total number of the sample of the study considered the first set of decisions right. Only 6 students constituting 10.5% believed that it was wrong. There is a statistically significant difference between who are for this set of decisions and those who are against it in favor of the former at the level of .01, $\chi^2 = 35.526$. This means that student teachers believe that learners should be taught the letters of the alphabet from the very beginning. Similarly, almost all student teachers (55) constituting 96.5% of the sample are for the second set of decisions dealing with exploiting reading texts in the course book. There is also a statistically significant difference in favor of those who are for this set of decisions at the level of .01, $\chi^2 = 49.281$. This means that they believe that reading texts in ELT textbooks are only there to contextualize language items and not to practice reading sub-skills. For the third set of decisions related to reading novels, the number of those against it (30 constituting 52.6%) is slightly greater than the number of people who are for it (27 constituting 47.4%). There is no statistically significant difference between the people who are for this set of decisions. Some people are for teaching novels through giving summaries and presenting vocabulary items and structures. Others are against this.

Practical Arguments Related to the First Set of Decisions

Table 2 displays the practical arguments related to vignette 1, the number and percentage of those who accepted each proposed reason and the number and percentage of those who rejected it. The value of χ^2 for each reason indicates the level of significance between them. It should be noticed also that the first four reasons are provided as possible practical arguments for considering the set of decisions related to vignette 1 right. Reasons 6 and 7, on the other hand are provided as possible justifications for considering this set of decisions wrong.

As table 2 shows, 42 student teachers constituting 73.7% accepted this reason as a justification for the set of decisions related to introducing literacy instruction early. Only 15 student teachers constituting 26.3% did not accept it. There is a statistically significant difference at the level of .01 between them in favor of those who accepted it ($\chi^2 = 12.789$). This means that the majority of student teachers believe that learning a language is primarily being able to read its alphabet.

Table 2: Practical arguments related to vignette 1 decisions

Practical arguments		Reject		Accept		χ^2
		C	%	C	%	
R1	Learning a language is primarily being able to read its alphabet	15	26.3%	42	73.7%	12.789**
R2	Without knowing the written form of the word learners will probably forget it.	18	31.6%	39	68.4%	7.737**
R3	Learners won't be able to revise these words without knowing how to read them	16	28.1%	41	71.9%	10.965**
R4	Parents expect the teacher of English to teach children how to read words from the very beginning	30	52.6%	27	47.4%	.158
R6	We know our first language orally before we know its letters	53	93.0%	4	7.0%	42.123**
R7	Presenting the letters of the alphabet confuses those young children.	52	91.2%	5	8.8%	38.754**

** significant at the level of .01, * significant at the level of .05

As for the second reason, 39 student teachers constituting 68% of the sample accepted it as possible justification for the early teaching of literacy, and 18 student teachers representing 31.6% rejected it. There is a statistically significant difference in favor of those who accepted it at the level of .01 ($\chi^2 = 7.737$). This means that the majority of student teachers believe that without knowing the written form of words, learners will probably forget them.

The third reason seems to be more accepted as a justification for the early teaching of literacy. The total number of people who accepted it was 41 representing 71.9% of the sample. Only 16 people constituting 28.1% rejected it. There is a statistically significant difference in favor of those who accepted it at the level of .01 ($\chi^2 = 10.965$). This means that the majority of student teachers believe that Learners won't be able to revise these words without knowing how to read them.

Contrary to the researcher's expectations, however, more people rejected the expectations of parents as a practical justification for the early teaching of literacy. The number of people who accepted this reason as a practical argument was 27 representing 47.4% and the number of people who rejected it was 30 constituting 52.6% of the sample. There is no statistically significant difference between them.

On the other hand, the two reasons (R6 and R7) proposed as practical arguments against the early teaching of literacy were rejected by the great majority of people. For R6, 53 people representing 93.0% rejected it and only 4 student teachers

constituting 7.0% accepted it. There is a statistically significant difference between them at the level of .01 in favor of those who rejected it (χ^2 =42.123). This means that the great majority of student teachers do not believe that we know our first language orally before we know its letters. Indeed, as shown in the qualitative analysis of data (see below), one of the practical arguments initiated by student teachers themselves for the early teaching of literacy is that learners learning Arabic at school usually start with the Arabic alphabet. Similarly, 52 people representing 93.0% rejected R7 as a possible practical argument for not teaching literacy early and only 5 student teachers representing 7.0% accepted it. There is a statistically significant difference between them at the level of .01 in favor of those who rejected it (χ^2 =38.754). This means that the majority of student teachers do not believe that presenting the letters of the alphabet confuses those young children.

Practical Arguments Related to the Second Set of Decisions

Table 3 displays the practical arguments related to vignette 2, the number and percentage of those who accepted each proposed reason and the number and percentage of those who rejected it. The value of χ^2 for each reason indicates the level of significance between them. It should be noticed also that the first six reasons are provided as possible practical arguments for considering the set of decisions right. The last three reasons, on the other hand, are provided as possible justifications for considering this set of decisions wrong.

Table 3: Practical arguments related to vignette 2 decisions

	Practical arguments	Reject		Accept		χ^2
		C	%	C	%	
R9	Reading aloud is an essential skill in language learning	20	35.1%	37	64.9%	5.070*
R10	Reading aloud improves learners' pronunciation. If pupils cannot pronounce a word correctly while reading aloud, the teacher can correct them	6	10.5%	51	89.5%	35.526**
R11	Reading aloud makes silent reading easier	34	59.6%	23	40.4%	2.123
R12	Pupils won't understand the text unless they know the meaning of all words that are not familiar to them.	23	40.4%	34	59.6%	2.123
R13	Simple questions on parts of each sentence will help pupils understand all the ideas in the text.	9	15.8%	48	84.2%	26.684**
R14	Giving a model reading by the teacher encourages learners to read the text by themselves.	17	29.8%	40	70.2%	9.281**
R16	People rarely read aloud in real life. So there is no need for reading aloud in class.	56	98.2%	1	1.8%	53.070**
R17	Reading aloud is a waste of time	56	98.2%	1	1.8%	53.070**
R18	Pupils need not understand the meanings of all the words in a text to understand it.	56	98.2%	1	1.8%	53.070**

The set of decisions included in vignette 2 are related to exploiting reading texts in the course books. For R9, 37 student teachers constituting 64.9% of the sample accepted it as a practical argument for the set of decisions included in vignette 2 and 20 student teachers representing 35.1% rejected it. There is a statistically significant difference between them at the level of .05 (χ^2 =5.070). This means that the majority of student teachers believe that reading aloud is an essential skill in language learning.

For R10, 51 student teachers representing 89.5% accepted it as a practical argument justifying the relevant decisions in vignette 2 and only 6 people constituting 10.5% rejected it. There is a statistically significant difference between those who accepted this argument and those who rejected it at the level of .01 in favor of the former (χ^2 =35.526). This means that the majority of student teachers believe that reading aloud improves student teachers' pronunciation.

As for R11, the number of those who accepted it as a practical argument (23 student teachers constituting 40.4%) is fewer than the number of people who rejected it 34 student teachers representing 59.6%). However, there is no statistically significant difference between them.

The importance of knowing the meaning of all words in understanding the text yielded different frequencies. The number of the people who accepted it (34 representing 59.6%) exceeds the number of people who rejected it (23 representing 40.4%). However, there is no statistically significant difference between them.

For R13, 48 student teachers constituting 84.2% accepted it as a practical argument for the decisions included in vignette 2 and only 9 student teachers constituting 15.8% rejected it. There is a statistically significant difference between them in favor of those who accepted it (χ^2 =26.684). This means that the majority of student teachers believe that direct reference questions help learners understand the reading text.

Similarly, 40 student teachers accepted R14 as a practical argument for the decisions in Vignette 2 constituting 70.2% and 17 student teachers constituting 29.8% rejected it. There is a statistically significant difference between them in favor of those who accepted it (χ^2 =9.281). This means that the majority of student teachers believe that giving a model reading by the teacher encourages learners to read the text by themselves.

On the other hand the people who reject the practical arguments provided against the decisions included in vignette 2 (R16-R19) were rejected by the majority of student teachers. Surprisingly, they yielded the same findings. For each one of them the number of those who rejected it was 56 student teachers representing 98.2% and only 1 student teacher representing 1.8% accepted it. There is a statistically significant difference between them at the level of .01 (χ^2 =53.070). This means that the great majority of student teachers do not believe that reading aloud is rare in real life. Nor do they believe that reading aloud is a waste of time. They seem to believe that learners need to understand the meaning of all the words in a text and that they need to understand all the details of the text.

Practical Arguments Related to the Third Set of Decisions

Table 4 displays the practical arguments related to the decisions included in vignette 3, the number of people who accepted each argument or rejected it and their percentage. It also displays χ^2 value for each practical argument. The first three reasons (R21-R23) are provided as possible practical arguments for the decisions included in this vignette and the last three reasons (R25-R27) are provided as possible practical arguments against them

Table 4: Practical arguments related to vignette 3 decisions

Practical arguments	Reject		Accept		χ^2
	C	%	C	%	

R21	Reading long stories is not very much useful in learning a foreign language.	50	87.7%	7	12.3%	32.439**
R22	What she decided to do is quite enough for preparing learners to answer the types of questions that occur in the final exam.	38	66.7%	19	33.3%	6.333*
R23	All that learners need to get out of a reading text are the useful structures and words that occur in it.	42	73.7%	15	26.3%	12.789**
R25	The activities she gave those learners are not similar to those we do when we read a story in real life.	47	82.5%	10	17.5%	24.018**
R26	Learners have to summarize the chapters by themselves.	33	57.9%	24	42.1%	1.421
R27	We read stories for fun and not for the structures and new words that occur in them.	47	82.5%	10	17.5	24.018**

** significant at the level of .01, * significant at the level of .05

The set of decisions included in vignette 3 is related to teaching novels. For R21, 50 student teachers representing 87.7% rejected it as a practical argument for the decisions made by the teacher in vignette 3 and only 7 students constituting 12.3% accepted it. There is a statistically significant difference between them at the level of .01 in favor of the people who rejected it (χ^2=32.439). This means that the great majority of student teachers believe that reading long stories is very useful in learning a foreign language.

One third of the total number of the sample, i.e. 19 student teachers representing 33.3% accepted R22 and 38 student teachers representing 66.6% rejected it. There is a statistically significant difference between them at the level of .05 in favor of those who rejected it (χ^2=6.333). This means that the majority of student teachers believe that the decisions used by the teacher for teaching the novel cannot be justified by their adequacy for preparing learners for the final exam or that these decisions are not adequate for preparing them for it.

Furthermore, 42 student teachers constituting 73.7% rejected R23 and only 15 student teachers constituting 26.3% accepted it. There is a statistically significant difference between them at the level of .01 in favor of those who rejected it (χ^2=12.789). This means that the majority of student teachers believe that reading a novel is not just for learning words and structures.

For R25, 47 student teachers representing 82.5% rejected it and only 10 student teachers representing 17.5% accepted it. There is a statistically significant difference at the level of .01 between them in favor of those who rejected it (χ^2=24.018). That the activities used by the teacher are not like real life activities is not considered a justification against using them. In other words they seem to believe that it is not necessary for those activities to be similar to real life tasks. Student teachers who rejected R26 (33 representing 57.5%) are more than those who accepted it (24 representing 42.1%). However, there is no statistically significant difference between them.

The great majority of student teachers (47 representing 82.5%) rejected the argument that we read stories for fun, not for words or structures, and only 10 student teachers representing 17.5% accepted it. There is a statistically significant difference at the level of .01 between them in favor of those who rejected it (χ^2=24.018). This means that student teachers of English believe that reading novels is for learning words and structures.

Self-initiated Practical Arguments

The first striking finding about the data is that self-initiated practical arguments for or against each decision are relatively infrequent despite all attempts made to encourage them to write as many practical arguments as possible in each section. Examples of self-initiated practical arguments can be found in Appendix A. This supports our earlier remark that tacit beliefs about teaching cannot be easily articulated. Indeed, many of the self-initiated reasons provided by student teachers cannot be regarded as practical arguments. Some of them were suggestions for alternative decisions or modified ones that can be used in such situations. Appendix A shows examples of student teachers' self-initiated practical arguments. The practical arguments provided against Decision Set 1 are interesting. Some of these arguments reflect some sort of trust in curriculum designers' knowledge and the possible risks that might arise if teachers/ student teachers do not adhere to the guidance recommended by textbook writers.

Conclusions

Based on data analysis of the present study, a number of conclusions can be made. First, student teachers of English come to the methods courses with pre-exiting beliefs about teaching the reading skill. Those beliefs constitute what might be called a sub-system of beliefs about teaching a foreign language. The majority of student teachers believe that young children need to be taught the alphabet from the very beginning. They also believe that delaying literacy instruction can have a detrimental effect on the whole process of learning a foreign language. To them a model reading by the teacher is important not because it facilitates independent silent reading, but because it helps improve children pronunciation. The same thing applies to reading aloud by students. It is commonly believed to be directly related to pronunciation. They also believe that children cannot read a text unless they know the meaning of all the words that occur in it. Their practical arguments related to reading text exploitation imply a view of reading that focuses on language forms rather than the sub-skills of the reading process. The majority of those student teachers agree to the need to present structures and vocabulary items that occur in reading texts. Even those who objected to the decisions made by this teacher did not select the practical argument related to exploiting reading text in ways similar to real life tasks. Reading, according to those student teachers, seems to be confined to verbalizing. Second, student teachers' belief systems about reading can host conflicting beliefs. This is specifically manifested in the practical arguments related to the teaching of novels. As mentioned earlier, there was no statistically significant difference between the people who accepted the decisions made by the teacher in the third vignette and those who rejected it. Informal unstructured interviews with some student teachers who accepted these decisions revealed that they did not agree to some of them. Most of them stressed the danger of killing student interest in reading the story and the possibility of developing learners' full dependence on the teacher. However, the great majority of them seem to believe that learners need to read stories for the structures and lexical items that occur in them. Finally, a major finding of the present study is that such beliefs are not very much idiosyncratic as reported in some previous studies. Those beliefs might be culture-specific. But, it is pre-mature to make such a claim.

Two major recommendations need to be made. One is the need to take student teachers' tacit beliefs as a starting point in any methodology course. Such courses need to focus on changing their tacit beliefs rather than on transmitting a set of

research-/ theory based amount of knowledge about teaching reading or teaching the foreign language in general. What is needed is further research aiming at capturing student teachers belief changes as a result of attending courses that help them reflect upon those beliefs to make the implicit explicit.

References

Al-Shabibi, A. (2004). *EFL Teachers' Tacit Beliefs about Writing Instruction in Oman*. Unpublished MA thesis, College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University.

Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers, think, know and do. *Language Teaching*, Vol. 36, (81-109).

Breen, M. et al (2001). Making sense of language teaching: teachers' principles and classroom practices: *Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 22/ 4, 47-501.

Cabaroglu, N and Roberts, J. (2000). Development in student teachers' pre-existing beliefs during a 1-year PGCE program. *System*, Vol. 28, 387-402.

Calderhead, J. (1995). Teachers: Beliefs and Knowledge: Berliner, D. and R. Calfee (eds) (1995). *Handbook of Educational Psychology*. NewYork: Macmillan Library Reference USA

Carter, K. (1992) Creating Cases for the Development of Teacher Knowledge. Russell, T. and H. Munnby *Teachers and Teaching: From Classroom to Reflection*. The Falmer Press.

Carter, K. (1990) Teacher Knowledge and Learning to Teach. In Houston, R. (ed.) *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, New York: Macmillan.

El-Okda, M. (1998). A Portfolio-Based Program for Developing Student Teachers' Disposition to Teach English Reflectively. *Journal of Educational Sciences*, Issue No. 12, Institute of Educational Studies, Cairo University.

Fenstermacher, G. and Richards, V. (1993. *The elicitation and reconstruction of practical arguments in teaching. Journal of Curriculum Studies*, Vol. 25/2,101-114.

Fenstemacher, G.   (1986) Philosophy of Research on Teaching: Three Aspects: Wittrock, M. (ed.) *Handbook of Research on Teaching*. 3rd.edition. New York: Macmillan.

Freeman, D. (2002). The hidden side of the work: Teacher knowledge and learning to teach. *Language Teaching*, Vol. 35, (1-15).

Gahin, G. H. (2001). An Investigation into Egyptian EFL Teachers' Beliefs. *Bridging the Gap between Teacher and Learner: Selected Papers from the 2000 International Conference*, Vol. V. TESOL Arabia, UAE, 109-131.

Marland, P. (1998). Teachers' Practical Theories: Implications for Preservice Teacher Education. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education and Development*, Vol. 1/ 2, 15-23.

Poulou, M. (2001). The role of vignettes in the research of emotional and behavioral difficulties. *Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties*, Vol. 6/ 1, 50-62.

Schon, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basil Books.

Shulman, J. (ed.) (1992). *Case Methods in Teacher Education*. Teachers College Press, New York.

Shulman, L.(1987). Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform: *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 57/1, 1-22.

Woods, D. (1996). *Teacher cognition in language teaching: beliefs, decision-making and classroom practice*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

Dr. El-Okda is an assistant professor of ELT Curriculum and Methodology at Sultan Qaboos University. Formerly, he was an associate professor at Cairo University and has taught EFL curriculum and methods of instruction at many other universities. He has published 21 papers and is especially interested in teacher cognition and teacher professional growth, reflective teaching and task-based language learning.

Appendix A

Student Teachers' Initiated Practical Arguments

	Practical arguments provided by student teachers
Arguments for Decision Set 1	❑ Learning the alphabet so early will enable them to receive more information. ❑ Without the alphabet, students will not be able to spell and write words. ❑ It is important to gain parents' trust. ❑ Learning the letters at the same time when they are learning Arabic letters will help them differentiate between Arabic letters and English ones. ❑ Reading aloud attracts students' attention in class and makes students interested in the lesson. ❑ This is the way Arabic is taught. So in teaching English we should start with the alphabet. ❑ Reading helps students to speak as well. ❑ Children will immediately ask for this. They want to know the letters.
Arguments against Decision Set 1	❑ The people who wrote the textbook are more experienced than her. They know what is good for the students. ❑ This will cause her a lot of troubles with the administrators. Why should she take such an adventure? If something wrong happens, she is not to blame. She must do just what she is asked to do. ❑ The curriculum was designed by people who know when it is right to present the alphabet. ❑ Giving a model reading will make the text familiar to students. ❑ Reading aloud will give a chance for other students to know the correct pronunciation of words. ❑ Learning the letters can be done in higher grades.
Arguments for Decision Set 2	❑ Presenting the meaning of all words will help students enrich their vocabulary. ❑ Model reading by the teacher will give students self-confidence. ❑ Model reading conveys feelings that make it easier for learners to understand the message. ❑ This decision will ensure more student participation. ❑ Reading aloud helps students correct their pronunciation mistakes and, therefore, avoid them in future.
Arguments against Decision Set 2	❑ Learners need to know how to guess the meaning of new words from context. ❑ Asking questions on every part of the sentence will be a waste of time.

Arguments for Decision Set 3	❑ Knowing the meaning of words will help students understand the story and as a result get more interested in reading it. ❑ Students have many things to do and they cannot read such a long story. ❑ There is no point in forcing weak students to read a story. They can't read it. ❑ This will make the story easier for students. ❑ Students do not have time at this stage to read a long story and they will benefit from the words given to them. All they need is to pass the exam and this method will help them to do so.
Arguments against Decision Set 3	❑ Learners need to acquire other skills such as summarizing and guessing words from context through reading stories. ❑ Students will acquire wrong study habits that can affect their learning of other subjects. ❑ The activities she used make the learner dependent on the teacher. ❑ The way she taught the story will make students hate reading stories in English. ❑ Asking students to memorize will never help them understand the story. ❑ Reading the story as a whole will help them learn more words. ❑ The teacher used a method that can prepare the students to pass the exam. But it won't help them learn the language.

Appendix B

A Vignette-Based Instrument For Eliciting

Student Teachers' Tacit Beliefs About Reading Instruction

Dear student teacher,

This is not a test. You need not write your name. The following are three cases of novice teachers. Facing specific situations in the foreign language classroom, they make certain decisions. A teacher decision usually has various reasons. If you think the teacher decision is right, check the reasons you think constitute reasonable arguments for making it. If you think it is a wrong decision, check the reasons that constitute a reasonable argument for this. You can add more reasons that you believe justify or falsify the decision in each case.

_____

Male [   ]   Female   [   ]

I.   After graduation, a colleague of yours was appointed as a teacher in a primary school to teach English to children in a grade 1 class in a Basic Education school. She was surprised to find that the textbook contained no reading tasks. All work in class was supposed to be oral and consisted mainly of games, songs and physical activities. She was told not to teach the letters of the alphabet. But she felt worried that children might forget a lot of the words she presented in those activities and games. So she decided to teach children the names of the letters of the alphabet and the written form of some of the words she presented.

❑ Do you think that her decision was right or wrong? Tick the appropriate box? ☐ Right ☐ Wrong

❑ If you think that her decision was right, choose the appropriate reason(s) for this:
1. Learning a language is primarily being able to read its alphabet
2. Without knowing the written form of the word learners will probably forget it.
3. Learners won't be able to revise these words without knowing how to read them
4. Parents expect the teacher of English to teach children how to read words from the very beginning
5. Other reasons? Please specify.
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………

❑ If you think that her decision was wrong, choose the appropriate reason(s) for this:
6. We know our first language orally before we know its letters
7. Presenting the letters of the alphabet confuses those young children.
8. Other reasons? Please specify.
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………

II. After graduation, a colleague of yours was appointed in a primary school to teach English to children in a grade 5 Basic Education class. The textbook contained long reading texts. Though his pupils have been studying English for four years, they found great difficulty in reading these texts. Most of the work done earlier consisted of oral work. Now they still enjoyed oral tasks, games and songs. But once they come to the reading text, they show no interest in looking at them. Many of them cannot recognize the written shape of words they can say orally. He decided to do a number of things. First, he would give them a model reading. Second, he would select some of them to read parts of the text aloud. Third, he would present meanings of all the words they might have forgotten. Fourth, he would ask them simple questions on each part of each sentence. .

❑ Do you think that his decision was right or wrong? Tick the appropriate box.
Right ☐   Wrong ☐

❑ If you think that it was a right decision, choose the appropriate reason(s) for this:

9. Reading aloud is an essential skill in language learning
10. Reading aloud improves learners' pronunciation. If pupils cannot pronounce a word correctly while reading aloud, the teacher can correct them.
11. Reading aloud makes silent reading easier

12. Pupils won't understand the text unless they know the meaning of all words that are not familiar to them.
13. Simple questions on parts of each sentence will help pupils understand all the ideas in the text.
14. Giving a model reading by the teacher encourages learners to read the text by themselves.
15. Other reasons? Please specify.
……………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………

If you think that it was a wrong decision, choose the appropriate reason(s) for this:
16. People rarely read aloud in real life. So there is no need for reading aloud in class.
17. Reading aloud is a waste of time
18. Pupils need not understand the meanings of all the words in a text to understand it.
19. Pupils need not understand all the details of the text.
20. Other reasons? Please specify
……………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………

III. After graduation a colleague of yours was appointed in a secondary school. She had to teach a story that is a bit long. She was supposed to give this story very few periods of her class time (only one period a week). She would ask her students to read a chapter or two at home and then try to ask them a few comprehension questions based on the main incidents and/ or characters. Every time most of her students came to class without any preparation of the assigned part. So she decided to do a number of things. First, she would give them a list of words that occurred in each assignment together with their meaning in English or in Arabic. Second, she would give them a printed summary of the main points of each chapter. Third, she would give them a list of questions on both incidents and characters together with their model answers. She would ask them to memorize these at home and then revise them in class. She also decided to add some grammatical exercises based on structures that occurred in the home assignment.

❑ Do you think that her decision was right or wrong? Tick the appropriate
box
Right   ⬚   Wrong   ⬚

❑ If you think that it was a right decision, choose the appropriate reason(s) for this:
21. Reading long stories is not very much useful in learning a foreign language.
22. What she decided to do is quite enough for preparing learners to answer the types of questions that occur in the final exam.

23. All that learners need to get out of a reading text are the useful structures and words that occur in it.

24. Other reasons? Please specify?

…………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………

❑ If you think that it was a wrong decision, choose the appropriate reason(s) for this:

25. The activities she gave those learners are not similar to those we do when we read a story in real life.

26. Learners have to summarize the chapters by themselves.

27. We read stories for fun and not for the structures and new words that occur in them.

28. Other reasons? Please specify.

…………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………