

## Teachers' Attitudes towards Curricular Reading Skill Integration: A Case Study

### Abstract:

In the present study, 70 content-area teachers completed a 29-item questionnaire in order to capture their attitudes towards the realities of curricular reading skill integration. The results showed that, in the absence of reading as a discrete subject; i.e., a module *per se*, content-area teachers in the Department of Letters and English Language are compensating for such a lack by teaching their students basic reading skills at the expense of teaching disciplinary literacy.

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### Résumé :

La présente étude vise à évaluer les effets du modèle des Johnson "Learning Together" (apprendre ensemble) de 1987 et l'évaluation de l'enseignant sur la capacité de rédaction des étudiants ALE (anglais comme langue étrangère). Pour mener à bien cette recherche, un véritable post-test aléatoire ou seulement le groupe de contrôle est invoqué. Le groupe expérimental a pratiqué l'écriture en groupe (en collaboration) utilisant le modèle LT et a reçu les évaluations (feedback) de l'enseignant, tandis que le groupe de contrôle ont écrit leurs essais individuellement. Les résultats de l'étude ont révélé que les élèves du groupe expérimental ont produit de meilleures compositions que les étudiants qui ont écrit individuellement. Le test-t a statistiquement confirmé la résultat obtenu à un niveau de signification de 0.05 et a déterminé l'efficacité de l'évaluation (feedback) de l'enseignant et de l'apprentissage coopératif sur la performance des étudiants ALE en rédaction.

### Introduction :

The present paper is an off-shoot of a larger doctoral research work that investigates the impact of implementing reading strategy-based instruction on promoting students' reading achievements. For over a century now, teachers have differentiated between learning to read and reading to learn instructions. Ever since, there has been a need for curricular reading skill integration as both a discrete subject and integrated in content-area subjects (Lapp, Flood and Farman, 2004). For that matter, Researchers tried to shed some light on teachers' attitudes towards curricular reading skill integration.

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In the hope of contributing to this debate, we addressed 70 content-area teachers to describe their perceptions about how reading is actually handled and about the possible alternatives for integrating it in the Department of Letters and English Language. Regarding the difference between elementary and disciplinary reading skills, this study intends to unveil content teachers' different responsibilities towards the teaching of Reading.

## 2. Background of the Study

Reading is a skill that is hard to capture in one definition and impossible to master in one sitting. Reading is not merely the process of recognizing graphic symbols but rather a series of high-order sub-skills ranging from decoding to critical thinking. It is the automatic process of interpreting meaning in different contexts and for different purposes based on readers' personal knowledge and experiences (Anderson, 2002). Teaching students the basic reading competencies which are applicable to most reading contexts is very important. However, teachers should not assume a natural development of these early reading competencies into reading skills proper to other disciplines like science, history or literature (Shanahan and Shanahan, 2008). The latter emphasized the importance of *teaching* to help student-readers move up the pyramid from basic and intermediate reading skills to disciplinary literacy. By disciplinary literacy, we mean reading skills which are proper to the content subjects' genres.

Teaching reading is in fact a vital skill for learning, if included as a discrete subject or integrated in content-area subjects like Written Expression, Literature, and the like..When Reading is taught by teachers of reading, reading instruction is then based on teaching students *how to read* by focusing on the basic reading components that can be adapted to various reading contexts. As there is "much more to reading than the basics, and that becomes especially clear as soon as students start to study the academic content areas." (Heller and Greenleaf (2007:7), it has grown paramount to integrate reading in content subjects.

In fact, integrating reading instruction in the different content-area subjects proved to be very effective as students show better internalization of reading skills and strategies (Harrison, 2004). To Grabe (2009), such an internalization requires a long and an ongoing process to allow for both the learning and cognitive maturation of the different skills and underlying processes. As teachers infuse reading instruction in their content-area teaching they allow for the *recycling* of the basic reading skills which would result in improved overall reading performances. However, content teachers should not assume responsibility for teaching basic reading skills. Given the nature of content-area texts, content teachers should provide specific disciplinary reading skills beyond basic literacy (Ness, 2009). Such disciplinary reading skills help students improve their learning and comprehension of the content of cross-curricular subjects (Heller and Greenleaf, 2007).

Ever since the integration of reading instruction in content-area subjects was called to action, teachers developed what is known as "resistance to content reading instruction" (O'Brien & Stewart, 1992). Researchers have listed several reasons behind teachers' reluctance including instructional time constraints; teachers' lack of preparation to teach reading skills, teachers' beliefs that reading skills cannot be related to content teaching and the fact that teachers "confuse

reading-to-learn with learning-to-read and perceive reading instruction as basic skills instruction [...]” (*ibid.* 32). Given that teachers’ beliefs and attitudes greatly influence their classroom practices (König 2012), the present work decided to investigate our F.L teachers’ perceptions regarding the contemporary demands for content area reading skill integration.

### **3. Methodology**

In the light of the different ideas presented, the researcher set herself to find out about content-area teachers’ attitudes towards the way the reading skill is covered in the Department of Letters and English Language. For that matter, a questionnaire was used.

#### **3.1. Description of the Questionnaire**

This descriptive study was based on quantitative data collected by means of a 29-item likert-type item questionnaire. The questionnaire’s items offered a five-point response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This 1 to 5 coding system was arbitrary, and it was only used to facilitate the data analysis. It should be noted that likert scales commonly “incorporate negatively worded items to circumvent the problem of response-set bias- the tendency of respondents to agree with a series of positively worded items” (Salkind, 2010:1491). For this questionnaire, 19 positive statements and 10 negatively worded items were used.

#### **3.2. Sample and Setting**

The survey took place in the Department of Letters and English Language, University of Constantine 1 between April and early May 2013. The study sample was of 70 teachers, including 21 of Written Expression, 9 Oral Expression, 4 Study Skills, 4 Linguistics, 7 Literature, 2 Civilization, 2 TEFL, 12 Language of Specialty, 4 Phonetics, 1 Acquisition Process, and 4 Research Methodology who voluntarily filled out the questionnaire. Teachers’ teaching experience level ranged from 1 to more than 20 years (Mean=10,3 years). The sample included 5 teachers with PhD, 64 teachers with Master or Magister degree (with no aim to use the two degrees interchangeably), and only one teacher with BA degree.

#### **3.3. Pilot Study**

A review of related literature and existing research offered a thorough understanding of the realities and perspectives of curricular reading skill integration which helped in instrument development. The questionnaire was pilot tested on 21 teachers taken from the same population of the study sample. The teachers of the piloting group were asked to fill in the questionnaire and provide their feedback. Based upon their feedback, an item was deleted and the expression "content-area subject" was replaced by the word “module”. The pilot questionnaire revealed that teachers recognize the need to investigate the way the reading is covered in the Department of Letters and English Language.

#### **3.4. Research Questions and Data Analysis**

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The questionnaire is not a summative likert-scale but rather a series of likert-type items. Because the elicited data were ordinal in nature, frequencies and percentages were used in the data analysis. This study was guided by three main questions:

1. How do teachers of the Department of Letters and English Language integrate reading in their classes, if ever?
2. Are there teachers' particular reasons for integrating or not integrating the reading skill?
3. What are teachers' reading skill integration preferences, if ever?

### **4. Description of the Results of the Main Study**

The percentages of both "strongly agree" and "agree" were summarized together, and the same was for "disagree" and "strongly disagree".

1. How do teachers of the Department of Letters and English Language integrate reading in their classes, if ever?

To this question, of the total respondents (N=70), 94% emphasize the importance of reading, and 91, 5% encourage their students to join university libraries and reading clubs. 84,3% of the respondents practice reading in the classroom by engaging their students in reading comprehension activities; and 90% by asking their students to read aloud; against 57, 2% of teachers believe that they know their students' reading level.

The present work did not seek to find out only about teachers' classroom practices regarding the reading skill but also about what motivates these practices. For that, we found out that 61,5% of teachers said they do not focus on the reading skill only to explain content specific texts; whereas 67,1% of teachers said that they teach students reading skills that can be adapted to others reading contexts (basic literacy). For that matter, 47,2% of teachers find teaching the subject content and reading overwhelming. 78,6% of teachers admitted integrating the reading skill implicitly; against only 45, 7% do explicitly.

2. Are there teachers' particular reasons for integrating or not integrating the reading skill?

**Table 1: Teachers' Reasons behind Integrating or not Integrating the Reading Skill**

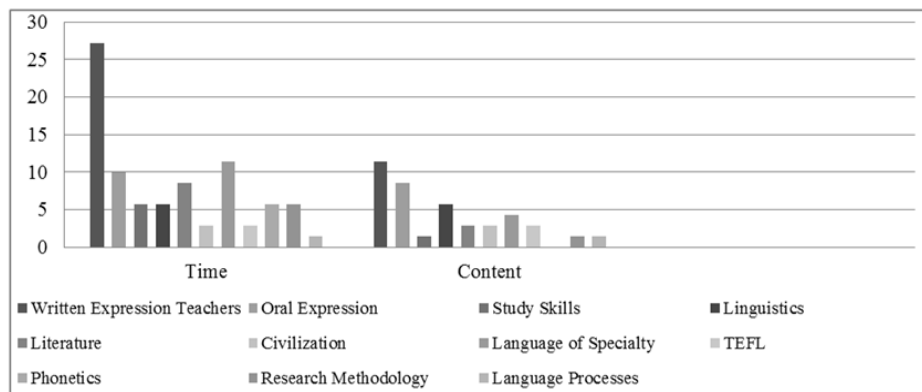
Responses	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
14. Students cannot improve their reading level by themselves without teachers' help	10	20	7	28	5
	14,3%	28,6%	10%	40%	7,1%
15. Time allocated per session not enough to teach the modules' content and the different reading skills	33	28	3	6	0
	47,1%	40%	4,3%	8,6%	0,00%
16. The content of the module does not allow for the integration of the reading skill	11	23	2	20	14
	15,7%	32,9%	2,9%	28,6%	20%
17. I do not have any formal knowledge of teaching reading	6	24	0	20	20
	8,6	34,3%	0,00%	28,6%	28,6%
18. I do not have any personal experience with teaching reading	7	25	0	21	17
	10%	37,5%	0,00%	30%	24,3%
19. I do not need any training or preparation to instruct my students in the different reading skills	4	15	4	32	15
	5,7%	21,4%	5,7%	45,7%	21,4%
20. Teaching reading is the job of teachers of reading that is why we should have ones	14	17	2	29	8
	20%	24,3%	2,9%	41,4%	11,4%
21. Every teacher is a teacher of reading and have a responsibility in improving students' level	18	31	4	15	2
	25,7%	44,3%	5,7%	21,4%	2,9%
22. Integrating the teaching of reading in my module is time consuming and not particularly efficient	1	13	13	29	14
	1,4%	18,6 %	18,6%	41,4%	20%
23. Teaching the content of my module and teaching reading are two different tasks	2	24	3	31	10
	2,9%	34,3%	4,3%	44,3%	14,3%

Table 1 lists some possible factors that might influence teachers' integration of the reading skill. Of the total respondents (N=70), 87,1% think that the session time is not enough to cover both the modules' content and the different reading skills. Despite the fact that 62,15% of teachers indicated that they have knowledge and experience with how to teach reading, 67,1% still admit that they could use a formal training on how to instruct students in the different reading skills.

70% of the participants believe that teaching reading is the responsibility of all teachers regardless of the content-area subject they teach. 52, 8% of respondents think that teaching reading is not exclusively the job of teachers of Reading. We found a sharp difference of opinion in teachers' answers regarding item 14 (cf. Table1). Indeed, of the total respondents, 42,9% think that students cannot improve their reading level without the teachers' help, while 47,4% of teachers think that students can. 58, 6% of teachers think that teaching reading skills and teaching content subjects are not two different tasks, moreover, 61,4% do not think that integrating the reading instruction in content-area subject is a waste of time. Because respondents teach different content subjects, their answers were divided into two opposing opinions about item 16 (cf. Table1). In effect, 48,6% think that the content of the module they teach does not allow for the integration of the reading instruction while some others (48,6%), think that the content of the modules does not hinder reading skill integration.

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**Figure 1: Teachers' Perception towards Content and Time Factors Classified by Content Subject**



The histograms in the figure above explain the sharp difference of opinion in teachers' answers regarding item 16. In fact, we thought that Oral Expression or even Research Methodology teachers will think that the content of the subjects they teach hinders reading skill integration. Out of the 48,6% of teachers who think that the content of the module they teach does not allow for reading integration, 11,42% are Written Expression teachers. In effect, teaching the reading and writing skills have been traditionally associated as teaching students how to read is a way of teaching them how to write.

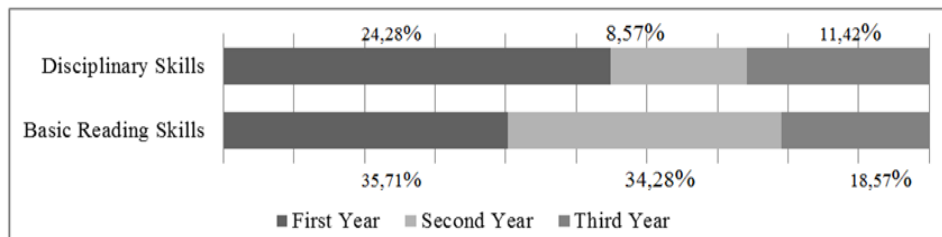
Instructional time constraints were also reported by content teachers as a factor that hinders content reading integration. Among the 87,1% of teachers who think that the time allocated to the content subject they teach is not enough to integrate the reading skill, 27,14% are teachers of Written Expression who have a total of three hours per week, and this is a period of time which is relatively long for allowing reading integration.

## 3. What are teachers' reading skill integration preferences, if ever?

Before we asked the teachers about their reading integration preferences, it was imperative first to make sure that they regard integrating reading instruction as important, regardless of the form of the integration. Of the total respondents (N=70), 90% think that it is important to infuse reading instruction in language teaching. In the process of questionnaire development, we expected teachers to prefer to integrate the reading skill either in the different content-area subjects or as a discrete subject where the reading skill gets to be the king: 75, 7% of teachers believe that they themselves should integrate reading in the different content subjects, against 75,8% of our respondents who believe that reading should be taught for its own sake as a separate module. 81,4% of teachers think that they should be provided with a model for a *proper* reading skill integration

Our content-area teachers were asked if they think students should be first presented with a reading instruction of basic reading skills; 88, 6% see that students must be first instructed in elementary and intermediate reading skills which are common to most reading tasks. Teacher respondents were also asked if they feel their students are ready to be presented with disciplinary reading skills. 44,3% admitted that their students are not ready to be taught reading skills proper to the different content-area subjects (disciplinary literacy). It is worth mentioning that both expressions, *basic reading skills* and *disciplinary literacy*, were explained in the questionnaires.

**Figure 2: Teachers' Preferences and Students' Readiness for the Different Reading Skills Classified by Grade Level**



In the questionnaire, we asked teachers about the grade level they are teaching. Out of the total number of respondents (44, 3%) who think that their students are not ready to be taught disciplinary reading skills, 24, 28% are first year teachers. When we asked teachers if students – not necessarily their students *per se* - should be first taught basic reading skills, 35, 71% are again first year teachers.

## 5. Discussion of the Results

The data obtained seem to suggest that content-area teachers at the Department of Letters and English Language, University of Constantine 1 are aware of their responsibility towards promoting students' reading level. Explicit teaching is a time-consuming strategy (Loddie, 2010; Ness, 2009; O'Brien & Stewart 1992). 87,1% of the respondents reported that the allocated time of their different modules (1 hour and thirty minutes to three hours/week) is not enough to cover both the subject content and the different reading skills, which explains why only 45,7% provide an explicit training of reading skills. Despite the fact that our respondents reported that they possess some knowledge and experience about teaching the reading skills, 67,1% admitted that they rather need a formal training on how to teach the reading skill and its adjacent sub-skills. In all likelihood, it is the teachers' lack of preparation which refrains them from integrating a variety of reading skills in content subjects (cf. Loddie, 2010).

Furthermore, when we asked teachers about what motivates their actual reading skill integration practices, we found out that content teachers seem to somehow impersonate teachers of reading. Data indicated that 67,1% teach students basic reading skills and strategies which are common to most reading contexts and do not teach reading **just** to explain content texts, which they should be doing. According to O'Brien & Stewart (1992, p. 32), one of

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content teachers' problems with integrating the reading instruction is the fact they "mistake what is actually a typical instructional responsibility (e.g., teaching content information) with what they feel is an added instructional burden." They explain that teaching basic reading skills is the responsibility of teachers of Reading, and that content-area teachers are only responsible for teaching disciplinary literacy. The fact that content teachers' reading skill integration is mainly focused on basic literacy skills explains why 47, 2% of teachers find teaching the subject content and reading overwhelming.

Disciplinary reading is so content-specific; i.e., every "academic discipline has its own set of characteristic literacy practices" (Heller and Greenleaf (2007, p.7), and by teaching content-related reading skills, teachers are teaching the content-area subject. Heller and Greenleaf (2007) assert that the reading skill is relevant to all content-area subjects. The present paper addressed teachers of most content-area subjects in the Department of Letters and English Language including teachers of Oral Expression and Research Methodology. We have purposefully cited these two because when we were administering the questionnaires, some Oral Expression and Research Methodology teachers argued that reading skills have nothing to do with teaching the content of their subjects. In fact, written texts can be a rich input for oral discussions. What is more, reading and understanding texts are vital for research making and for teaching students borrowing techniques, like paraphrasing and summarizing, as students do in Research Methodology classes.

The findings also indicate that our respondents are aware of the importance of curricular reading skill integration. 75,8% expressed a need for integrating the reading skill not only as a discrete subject taught by subject matter specialists but also infused in the other modules. According to Shanahan and Shanahan (2008), for students to be introduced with disciplinary literacy, they should first properly internalize primary and intermediate reading skills. 88, 6% of the respondents (35, 71% are first year teachers) confirmed the importance of respecting the sequencing of literacy development; i.e., basic then disciplinary reading skills; 44,3% of them (24,28% are first year teachers) think that their students are not ready to be presented with disciplinary literacy. Based upon the points discussed, content-area teachers at the Department of Letters and English Language are weighted down with the load of teaching their students basic reading skills at the expense of teaching them disciplinary literacy which is vitally important for learning. For that, it seems imperative to integrate basic reading skills, as a discrete subject, at least for first-year students.

### 6. Conclusion

'Every teacher is a teacher of reading' is one of the most debatable philosophies in the education enterprise. Studies that investigated teachers' perceptions towards integrating the reading instruction in content-area subjects were carried out in contexts where reading is taught both for its own sake in the English class and in a Remedial Reading class and in the different content subjects. The present study took place in a context where there is no formal educational policy of how to cover the reading skill neither in cross curricular subjects nor as a discrete subject. Admittedly, Study Skill teachers *recently* integrated a chapter of reading for learning



strategies, but, as reviewed in the preceding literature, time is a key factor for a proper internalization of any learning strategies. This paper, in addition to answering the three research questions, tried to shed some light on the stereotypic attitudes associated with curricular reading skill integration. The findings based on teachers' opinions suggest that students' non-readiness for disciplinary literacy and the absence of reading as a discrete subject made content-area teachers in the Department of Letters and English Language at University of Constantine 1 take on the role of teachers of reading by teaching their students basic reading skills sometimes at the expense of teaching disciplinary literacy.

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