The EFL Teacher's Attitudes and Perspectives Toward the Synthetic Phonics for Helping First Graders Improve Reading Performance in Jordan. A Qualitative Design

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Abstract:- **Teaching English in Jordan occupies an important area in the education policy. Different studies discussed how to promote students' reading performance. The current study sought to investigate the EFL teacher's attitudes and perspectives toward the synthetic phonetics for teaching first graders to master the ability to read words in Jordan. The sample of the study consisted of (150) EFL male and female teachers who work in different schools in Zarqa Directorate in Jordan. To achieve the goal of the study, the researcher used the qualitative design (Questionnaire). The tool of study was a questionnaire which was divided into two domains, the knowledge of the synthetic approach and the practical instruction model. The results of the study showed a variety of attitudes and perspectives among the EFL teachers' responses. Some of the findings were shocking; they revealed that a lot of teachers had no idea about the synthetic approach, how to teach it properly and how to assess it the right way. Findings of the study also revealed to what extent EFL teachers in Jordan needed training courses which enable them to do their profession well. The researcher recommended that EFl teachers should keep up to date modern instruction approaches in order to help their children increase their abilities in improving decoding and reading performance.**

Keywords:- Phonics, synthetic approach, analytic approach, phonological awareness, L2 acquisition, letter-sound correspondences and literacy.

I. INTRODUCTION

After the 1999s, English as a foreign language has been taught alongside with the Arabic language in all the Jordanian schools in both of sectors, private and public, at the early age of six. Since then, and in order to fulfill the growing demands for effective teaching and learning in the public schools, educational reform projects have been being supported and funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Alhabahba et al, 2016). On the other hand, Bani Abdo & Breen (2010) indicated in their study that most Jordanian students still encounter different problems in their acquisition of English, in part because EFL teachers fail to employ effective EFL teaching methods. Consequently, if children do not learn how to read, they cannot read to learn.

The core of methodology is to promote the process of teaching English by helping and facilitating teachers to work proficiently and effectively. But among EFL teachers, here, in Jordan, the situation is different, Hmeadat (2016) for instance confirmed in his study that the ignorance of the appropriate revolutionary methods to teach English opens the floodgates to the English teachers' thoughts and their misconception about the appropriate approach, each according to his/her point of view. As a consequence, it becomes imperative to worry about the appropriate method that may help EFL teachers to deal with this obstacle in order to teach English as systematic as possible especially in the very early one stages.

One of these approaches is the synthetic phonics approach. The synthetic phonics according to Johnston &Watson (1998) is used in Germany and -Austria and is generally taught before children are introduced to books or reading. It involves teaching small groups of letters very rapidly, which are selected because they combine together to make up many words. According to Manzo (1993) there are four basic approaches to teaching the word analysis aspects of decoding unknown words: analytic, synthetic, tactile-kinesthetic and finally the contextual approach.

Starting out from the government needs to address the loopholes in the education policy and as a reaction to the claim of the former Jordanian education minister at the time, Mohammad Thneibat, who claimed that "more than 100,000 students in grades 1-3 are illiterate"1(Jan 19,2014). Therefore, this study emerges to assist EFL teachers, especially in the primary stages, and equip them with the necessary tools they may need.

According to Hedgcock & Ferris (2018) this approach was introduced by the early literacy education in the USA between (1960s and 19970s), known as the implicit phonics. For Tamura (2006) the supporters of this method were of the opinion that the teaching of a language should start with the written text and by its analysis to teach its words and rules. The precursor of this analytical method was Wolfgang Radke or Ratichius (1571-1635) whose ideas surpassed the time he lived in. According to his concept everything had to be taught

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http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/house-alliance-ready-plan-overhaul-education-sector. The Jordan Times is an independent English-language daily published by the Jordan Press Foundation since October 26, 1975.

by logical sequence. The text should be first presented, then grammar.

Some researchers recommended using the analytic approach, in which sounds are taught as part of words that the child has learned previously. Sounds are not taught in isolation and drilled as individual units, but are taught within the context of words that are known and part of a child's sight vocabulary (Cohen and cowen,2008). Further, Glazzard and Stokoe (2013) claimed that this approach had its own pillars such as it doesn't use the smallest unit of sound. For example, in the words ' cat', mat','rat' and 'sat', children are introduced to the common block of sounds /at/ which is called the rime. Meanwhile, the consonant preceding the vowel is the onset. Moreover, Glazzard and Stokoe (2013) added that the teaching of consonant clusters such as /bl/,/cr/,/sm/ and so on represents this approach.

This approach is based on beginning with a known word, and studying its parts in sequence. It tends to teach the sounds of the alphabet, sight words, then regular consonants, and later irregular consonants and vowels. Students are taught to rely on the initial and final consonants to get a rough idea of what a word says. In general, students are encouraged to see and hear certain targeted letters and then to proceed to analyze a word until they recognize it as a word they know (Manzo,1993). For the most part, however, analytical phonics programs tend to avoid nonsense words. Students are taught to rely on context as additional clue in recognizing familiar words and making predictions about the pronunciation of newer ones. (Ibid.,p243)

According to Wearmouth (2017) the main characteristics of the analytical approach are the form, it starts from the analysis of consonants, blends, digraphs, diphthongs and vowels within the context of the whole word. Urbanová (2016) considered this approach an essential tool to assist children develop a large sight vocabulary. In other words, letter sounds are analyzed after the word has been identified. According to this approach, students are taught one and only one letter sound every week. Then pictures are shown to children and later words that begin with that sound are introduced.

A. Synthetic Phonics Approach

The synthetic approach is the main concern of this research paper. It addresses the letter-sound correspondences and the way it is employed to teach English for children.

B. Phonics and early reading in the UK

The reading wars have a long history. In recent years, government in the UK and in some other English-speaking countries has promoted the teaching of "synthetic phonics" as the key to success in training young readers. In this approach (sometimes known also as "systematic phonics"), a child learns the correspondences between sounds (phonemes) and letters: for example, pronouncing each phoneme in shop /sh/-/o/-/p/ and then blending those phonemes to produce the word. (Hodgson et al,2013; Wearmouth,2017)

Systematic synthetic phonics is an approach to teaching phonics. It is the approach embedded in the government's current guidance on the teaching of reading. The approach adopts the Simple View of Reading, which identifies two processes in reading words recognition and reading comprehension. In this model these two aspects of reading are separate and must be actively taught as different skill that underpin the ability to read words (word recognition skills) and the ability to understand sentences and texts (language comprehension). (Neaum, 2012).
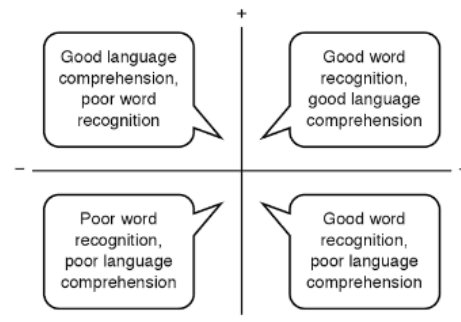

Fig 1:- The Simple View of Reading

Now, it is time to show the main differences between synthetic approach and analytic approach (Mohr & Price, 2017; Watson& Johnston2014;Lewis, M & Ellis 2006).

	Items	Analytic Approach	Synthetic Approach
1	Importance of sounds and blending	Emphasis on the Initial sounds	Every sound has its own importance regardless its position (initial, medial or final). Blending taught very early on.
2	Time	Teaching one sound takes a week.	Teaching eight sounds takes two weeks, 4 sounds per week.
3	Speed	Slow	Fast
4	Priority	Whole –to part, teaching letter names	Part-to whole, 44 sounds are taught first. Letter-sound correspondences.
5	alphabet	Alphabet is central	Letter names are not taught at the beginning
6	Exceptions	Many exceptions	Exceptions are to a minimum.
	Guessing	Important	Reading doesn't need guessing, but systematic.
	Sight words	Important	Less important

Table 1. Shows the differences between the analytic and synthetic approaches.

C. Aims of the study

The study aims to investigate the EFL Teachers' Attitudes and Perspectives toward the Synthetic Phonics for Teaching First Graders. It sheds lights on two main approaches of the phonic method. Moreover, it tries to draw attention to the crucial differences between synthetic approach and the analytic approach.

D. Problem statement

A plethora of conducted studies (Khawaldeh, 2010; Manasrah (2015); Al-Qahtani (2016); Alhabahba et al (2016); Al-Sobhi (2018; Al Tamimi (2015) showed that the main obstacles and challenges that encounter EFL teachers in the Arab region in general and in Jordan in specific regarding methods of teaching could be classified into three main categories; the use of insufficient teaching methods, lack of professional training programs and the third category were the linguistic competence of EFL teachers. In regarding curriculums and materials, curriculum developers work hard to enrich every material with what fulfill students' needs and promote both their linguistic and metalinguistic capacities (Kirkpatrick, 2015).

However, according to Shankar (2010) EFL teachers traditionally employ certain methods in order to equip their learners with the necessary skills to decode words. Some of these methods are alphabetic method, word method, syllabic method and the phonetic method. According to Yigezu (2010) each one of these teaching models has its own features and its pros and cons. This current study highlighted the key role of both the analytic and synthetic approaches as indispensable instruction models and head the study to investigate the EFL teachers' attitude and their perspectives toward the synthetic approach in specific.

E. Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following question;
1.4.1 What are EFL teachers' attitudes and perspectives toward the synthetic phonics for teaching First Graders to master the ability to decode the English words?

F. The Significance of Study

This work will assist children acquire the necessary skills to master the ability to decode familiar and unfamiliar words. It help students attend to the importance of the smaller units of the internal structure of language. It will enable EFL teachers, particularly the first grade teachers, to adopt positive attitudes toward the synthetic phonics instruction and become more motivated in the teaching-learning process.

G. Limitations of Study
- The study is confined to a sample of EFL teachers in Jordan.
- Teachers' ages ranged in between 24-54 years old.
- The academic year 2019-2020.

II. FRAMEWORK

Different experts in the field of teaching phonics such as (Ehri et al,2001;Wearmouth ,2017; Hedgcock & Ferris,2018) confirmed that synthetic phonics programs use *a part-to-whole approach* that teaches children to convert graphemes into phonemes (e.g., to pronounce each letter in stop, /s/-/t/-/o/-/p/) and then to blend the phonemes into a recognizable word. In contrast, Analytic phonics uses *a whole-to-part approach* that avoids having children pronounce sounds in isolation to figure out words (Hedgcock & Ferris,2018). Ehri et al (2001) also differentiated between several different phonics programs; these include synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, analogy phonics, onset–rime phonics, and phonics through spelling.

With this synthetic phonics approach, and before children are introduced to books, they are taught letter-sounds correspondences. After the first few of these have been taught they are shown how these sounds can be blended together to build up words (Watson, Johnston, 2014;Feitelson, 1988). For example, when taught the letter sounds /t/ /p/ /a/ and /s/ the children can build up the words 'tap', 'pat', 'pats', 'taps', 'a tap' etc. The children are not told the pronunciation of the new word by the teacher either before it is constructed with magnetic letters or indeed afterwards; the children sound each letter in turn and then synthesise the sounds together in order to generate the pronunciation of a new word. Thus the children construct the pronunciation for themselves (Johnston & Watson, 2014).

Further, Most of the letter sound correspondences, including the consonant and vowel digraphs, can be taught in the space of a few months at the start of their first year at school. This means that the children can read many of the unfamiliar words they come across in any text for themselves, without away from the teacher's help. By contrast in analytic phonics, whole words are presented and pronounced by the teacher, and children's attention is only subsequently drawn to the information given by letter-sound correspondences (Johnston & Watson,2005,p 11-12).

According to Ehri et al (2001) in their study "in order for children to be able to link their knowledge of oral language to what they know about the written language (the print), they must first master the alphabetic code, that is, the system of grapheme–phoneme correspondences that links the spellings of words to their pronunciations. Phonics instruction teaches beginning readers the alphabetic code and how to use this knowledge to read words. In systematic phonics programs, a planned set of phonics elements is taught sequentially. The set includes not only the major correspondences between consonant letters and sounds but also short and long vowel letters and sounds, and vowel and consonant digraphs (e.g., oi, ea, sh, th). It also may include blending of letter–sounds that form larger subunits in words. The larger units taught might include onsets (consonants that precede vowels, such as "j" in

jump or "st" in stop) and rimes (i.e., the vowel and following consonants such as "ump" in jump and "op" in stop)".

> *Literature Review*

Different studies discussed the synthetic phonetic and the analytical approaches. They all confirmed the importance and the key role that synthetic approach played in the field of teaching primary stages. The study of Watson and Johnston (2005) became a great evidence in this field. Professor Rhona Johnston, a psychologist at the University of Hull, argued strongly for synthetic phonics rather than the analytic phonics approach embodied in the National Literacy Strategy. She explained her study in Clackmannanshire as a 16-week trial that compared different types of phonics teaching. She reported that the synthetic phonics group, given 20 minutes of input per day, made far greater progress than groups on other phonics programs, and that synthetic phonics had a long term effect on spelling and on word reading (Education and Skills Committee, 2005 p. 77–87).

The study involved around 300 children in Primary grade 1. Those children were divided into three groups, concluded that a synthetic phonics program, as a part of the reading curriculum, has a major and long lasting effect on children's reading and spelling attainment. Indeed, these skills were found to be increasing many years after the end of the program. It is evident that the children have learnt a technique that they can use for themselves, that they have learnt a self-teaching technique. Further, The English teachers felt that reading, spelling and writing skills had been greatly accelerated by the program.

The study of McKnight & Schowengerdt, (2001) declared that reading loudly and the effect of a training in phonemic awareness have been promoted as two ways to foster children's reading ability. Reading aloud encourages children to find pleasure and fun in reading and use literature to help in learning. Children with early awareness of individual sounds in words, phonemes, and the ability to manipulate them are more likely to become good and proficient readers. Using a multiple baseline across subjects design. The present study compared two preschool age children, matched on age, reading experience, and a pretest measure, during reading aloud and specific strategies targeted at training phonemic awareness.

The training program employed was "Ladders to Literacy" and the children's progress was monitored using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). Four DIBELS measures, Letter Naming Fluency (LNF), Sound Naming Fluency (SNF), Initial Phoneme Ability (IPA), and Phonemic Segmentation Ability (PSA) were used. Results showed that following training, each child's performance on SNF, IPA, and PSA improved; performance on LNF varied. Conclusions and future research are discussed.

A comparison was made of 10-year-old boys and girls who had learnt to read by analytic or synthetic phonics methods as part of their early literacy program. The boys taught by the synthetic phonics method had better word reading than the girls in their classes, and their spelling and reading comprehension was as good. In contrast, with analytic phonics teaching, although the boys performed as well as the girls in word reading, they had inferior spelling and reading comprehension. Overall, the group taught by synthetic phonics had better word reading, spelling, and reading comprehension Johnston & McGeow &Watson (2011).

The study of Stuart (1999) addressed the difference between synthetic and analytic approaches. This study chose five-year old children, with sample size 112 participants who were out of whom 96 were second language learners. Those children were divided into two groups. One was taught through the phonics method and the other group was taught through the whole-word method. Phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge were tested in advance. Children were post-tested for twice, one was conducted after the intervention immediately and the other one after a year. Results showed that students taught by phonics highly benefited from the synthetic method. Phoneme awareness and knowledge of phonics grew up considerably and this promoted children's reading and writing abilities.

The study of Eshiet (2012) examined the one of the reasons of poor reading literacy in Nigeria, teaching methods and suggested another modern approach, the synthetic approach. Therefore, a training program based on the synthetic approach was employed. The quasi experimental method was used alongside the case study design in this study in assigning some schools to receive the intervention and excluding other schools from the intervention. The tests employed in the intervention were, Burt reading tests (1974), Schonell spelling test (1952), blending test, and Ruth Miskin's phoneme awareness test (2006). Findings of the study showed improved reading achievement of children.

> *Comments on the Previous Studies*

In short, all the studies mentioned above (Eshiet,2012; Stuart (1999; McKnight & Schowengerdt, (2001; Watson and Johnston,2005) and others more indicated to what extent the synthetic approach played a significant role in promoting learners' abilities to decode and read words. Their findings proved the positive impact of using synthetic approach on developing learning capacities to deal with familiar or new words. Moreover, the findings showed high attitudes and positive reactions toward the different tasks and activities used in the interventions as well. In addition, mean scores of children's answers varied among the different tasks but showed positive effect from a side and the approach revealed its ability to produce skilled readers, too.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Sample of the Study

The population of this work consisted of all the EFL teachers in Az Zarqa 2nd Directorate of Education, Az Zarqa

Municipality. The sample consisted of (200) male and female participants who were selected randomly in order to investigate their attitudes and perspectives toward the synthetic approach for teaching first graders to master the ability to read familiar and new English words.

B. Tools of the Study

The researcher used the following tools: a questionnaire to find out the attitudes of EFL teachers in Jordan toward the synthetic approach.

C. Questionnaire

For reliability purposes, the questionnaire was administered to a group of English instructors in different schools whether inside or outside the Second Directorate of Education in Zarqa. A correlation coefficient of 0.84 was considered appropriate, given the purpose of the study. A pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted on 25 EFL primary school teachers (outside of the sample) to test the reliability of the questionnaire. A Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.86 has been reported indicating a high level of reliability of the scale for the first part of the questionnaire. Meanwhile, the Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of the second part was recorded as 0.72. The validity was also checked for through consulting a panel of university professors and educational experts in the field. All panel recommendations and suggestions were taken seriously.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher administered the current questionnaire as a tool to investigate the EFL Teachers' Attitudes and Perspectives toward the Synthetic Phonics for helping First Graders to Master the ability to read English words in Jordan. The questionnaire is consisting of two parts, the first one involves 4 Likert-type close-ended items, which explores the teachers' knowledge toward the general background of Synthetic Phonics. The second part includes teachers' attitudes about teachable SP in the field of English language teaching. It involves 3 likert-type close-ended items. However, a sample of (150) teachers expressed their willingness to participate in the current questionnaire.

Responses to the first statement 'Synthetic Phonics is a topic which I studied at the university' showed that 41% of teachers had no idea about whether SP was one of the topics they studies at the university. In contrast, just 12% pf participants agreed about it. Meanwhile, responses to the second statement 'I know well that SP is a teaching approach' showed that 40% had no idea whether SP was a teaching approach or not. In contrast, 27% agreed strongly. These percentages confirmed that a minimum of recognition about this topic had been realized.

The statement, section1,n.13, entitled'There is no relation between the Synthetic Phonics and L2 acquisition' indicated the heart of this research paper. Responses revealed that 35% had no idea about the correlation between SP and L2

acquisition. In contrast, only 9% disagreed. These percentages were shocking and needed more practical researches in specific. However, the need to educate and sensitize EFL teachers about this instruction approach is urgent. However, 31 % strongly consensed and agreed on.

The statement, Section 1, n.10 'SP is an approach that uses part -to- whole instruction' represented the core of Synthetic Phonic approach. It focused on the essential part that should be introduced first in teaching children. Hence, instruction began from smaller units (phonemes and graphemes) moving to larger units (sentences). Answers given to this item were (45% of participants had no idea whether SP is based on part-to whole instruction or not. Meanwhile, 11 % strongly agreed on this and 26% disagreed. Moving from smaller units such as phonemes and graphemes is the first step in teaching decoding and reading, then dividing syllables into onset-rime part, and later on breaking a sentence down into words (the largest unit). In addition, only 9% disagreed that teaching onset-rime is essential and 51% disagreed with the need to teach it in the primary stages.

The highest point recorded in Section 2, was for the item 'The number of vowels in English is only five'. 87% of participants' responses were "yes" in an indication that English doesn't have more than 5 vowels and this result was really striking. In contrast, only 10% answered "No" in an indication that there were more than five vowels. However, responses given to item n.12, section 2, entitled' I think teaching the consonants first is a must' were 82%. Actually, many conducted studies confirmed that short vowels should be taught first and later on selected consonants, according to visual and auditory similarities and difference, should be introduced and others should be delayed and this was consistent with Eshiet,2012;Torgesen & Mathes,2002; Fisher & Lapp,2011. This percentage was confirmed in item n.14 which indicated that 62% believed that vowels shouldn't be introduced first. In contrast, 23% believed that the vowels should be taught very early on.

However, the item n.15 ' Some EFL teachers don't keep up-to date on new researches, especially these relate to SP' showed the lowest point in which only 3% heard that for the first time. In contrast, 82% of responses given agreed on. This item showed the need for EFL teacher who keep up-to-date during their professional experience. Consequently, there was a consensus about the ignorance of the importance of modern researches.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study has been conducted in order to investigate the EFL teachers' attitudes and perspectives toward the use of synthetic approach for helping children master the reading performance. The findings of the study revealed that most of EFL teachers lack of basic knowledge of the synthetic phonics and they showed no or very little recognition of the way synthetic phonics is taught nor the way

it is assessed. EFL teachers proved their need to more professional training courses that promote their capacities to teach English the right way. The study also showed that most EFL teachers believed that the English alphabet was taught in the same sequence order which was rejected by this approach. However, the synthetic approach is based on a firm framework that should be followed in teaching children in order to get positive results.

The researcher recommended other researchers to conduct practical synthetic phonetic intervention to investigate its impact on primary stages in Jordan. The researcher recommended also EFL teachers to keep up to date revolutionary researches related to instruction methods.

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