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Long Abstract

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READING ACQUISITION AMONG EMERGENT READERS LEARNING EFL IN SMALL GROUPS WITHIN A MULTI-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction

Aims and focus

There is consensus among researchers that acquiring good reading abilities is significant, not to say critical for success in the 21st century. Not only is reading the skill that matters most to success in school, but children whose reading falls behind face great academic danger. Literacy is crucial since it can affect levels of income and opportunity for people. Hence, in our modern world reading is obviously an essential skill. In Israel, as well as in other countries, it is not enough to be literate in one's native tongue. Since English serves as an international language, there is a strong need to be literate in this language. Nevertheless, my experience in the education system over the last 19 years both as an English teacher and coordinator as well as an English teachers' counselor and trainee's supervisor has shown me that some students do not become proficient readers or readers at all, for different reasons.

As part of the reform in the education system in Israel in recent years all teachers regularly meet students outside classrooms working in small groups of no more than 5 pupils. In addition, teachers are gradually taking part in in-service courses to acquire tools to cope with emergent readers in classrooms and to make efficient use of small group hours.

As part of my MA thesis (Nachmani, 2008) I researched how English teachers integrate emergent readers within English classrooms with the aim of promoting their reading abilities. The evidence gathered from that research indicated that, although promotion of emergent readers can be done in a whole class program if certain principles are taken into consideration, it is more effective to provide intense instruction on an individual or small group basis. This was one of the triggers for the current research. Another trigger came from a gap in knowledge I faced as an English teacher and teachers' counselor in the field. As a regional English teachers' counselor, I was asked to put together an in-service course to equip English teachers with tools to cope with emergent readers in classrooms and make efficient use of small group hours that have become part of the requirements. Yet, I had difficulty in finding relevant resources. From what I saw, it seemed that the professional literature dealing with the

issue of emergent readers and small group instruction tended to refer to teaching English as a mother tongue or a second language and not teaching English as a foreign language. Moreover, much was written about the nature of reading and learning to read. However, no research was found regarding the acquisition of EFL reading of emergent readers in small group frameworks in a multi-cultural learning environment. Thus, this research intended to fill this gap in knowledge. Contribution to theoretical knowledge was made in the domain of reading acquisition in EFL within small groups and a multi-cultural learning environment. This research also contributed to the practice of teaching English since it intends to help elementary school teachers significantly promote emergent readers and develop their reading skills within a multi-cultural learning environment. The hypothesis was that raising teachers' awareness to cultural factors involved in reading acquisition and their influence on EFL reading acquisition would ultimately lead to effective promotion of EFL emergent readers' reading abilities.

In this research I sought to examine **reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment.** It depicted critically the ways in which English teachers promote emergent readers in their 5^{th} grade classes. The study focused on teachers' and experts' perceptions and teachers' practices.

The research aims were:

1. To investigate the procedures teachers use while promoting reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment;
2. To develop a model for promoting emergent readers through small group instruction.

The research addressed the following **research questions**:

1. What **perceptions** exist among teachers and experts regarding factors that promote and hinder learning to read in EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment?

2. What **procedures** do teachers use while promoting reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment?
3. How can **cultural factors influence reading acquisition in EFL**?

Significance of the research

This research deals with perceptions and practices regarding reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment. Evidently, EFL teachers in Israel and all around the world are expected to provide differential instructions for students with diverse learning needs including different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The ambivalence regarding the significance of culture in an EFL reading context, which was revealed in this research among EFL Israeli teachers, strengthens the importance of this research since raising EFL teachers' awareness to this issue will ultimately result in providing EFL students with differential culturally sensitive reading instruction. Thus, the research contributes to theoretical as well as applied knowledge in dealing with emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment. It is my belief that raising teachers' awareness to the significant role culture plays in EFL reading acquisition and providing them with the relevant knowledge and tools will result in changes not only in the way teachers promote emergent readers' reading abilities in a small group framework, but in the way they provide reading instruction in a classroom framework – providing prevention instead of intervention.

Key words: EFL, reading acquisition, EFL emergent readers, small group instruction, multi-cultural learning environment

CHAPTER I: LITERATURE REVIEW

This research draws on reading acquisition approaches, represented by Grabe and Stoller (2011), Alderson (2000) and Nuttall (2000), approaches to teaching reading and remedial reading instruction represented by Minskoff (2005), Shaywitz (2003) and Birsh (2005) and multi-cultural language education theories represented by Tomilson (2005) and Banks (2010).

Extant literature about reading acquisition relates mainly to the nature of reading and learning to read. Nevertheless, no research was found regarding the acquisition of EFL reading of emergent readers in a small group framework within a multi-cultural learning environment.

This research focuses on effective promotion of reading abilities among EFL emergent readers learning in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment. More specifically it focuses on teachers' perceptions and practices regarding promoting and hindering factors in learning to read in EFL and teachers' perceptions regarding influences of cultural factors on reading acquisition in EFL. The research is based on the premise that reading acquisition is complex and involves various processes and different knowledge areas, abilities and skills. Additionally, approaches to teaching reading include mainly phonics instruction which introduces learners with the rules of alphabet and letter sound correspondence. Furthermore, remedial reading instruction needs to be implemented as soon as learners fail to acquire reading. This should be done basically through small group instruction using phonics instruction and a multisensory teaching approach. Finally, unique aspects involved in reading in EFL including cross-linguistic transfer as well as other cultural factors such as culture of learning, social attitude towards target language, developed vocabulary knowledge and 'schematic knowledge'. **Therefore, a major part of the way to effectively promote EFL emergent readers' reading abilities resides within raising teachers' awareness to cultural factors involved in reading acquisition and their influence on EFL reading acquisition.**

Consequently, the conceptual framework of this research pertains to 5 interrelated areas: EFL, reading acquisition, EFL emergent readers, small group instruction and multi-cultural learning environment

The theoretical foundations of the cultural factors affecting EFL reading acquisition

The theoretical foundation of this research involves five main components.

1. **EFL** entails learners who already possess at least one other language and do not use English for everyday communication with their community (Tomlison, 2005). The goal of EFL studies is to produce good users of the English language (Israel Ministry of Education, 2001 and 2015) to answer the changing world of English that has become a global means of communication (Ur, 2012).

2. **Reading acquisition** theories are based on the understanding that reading is a complex process that involves a sophisticated interaction of a set of component skills and processes (Grabe, 2009). Moreover, reading does not simply occur but rather it is acquired and needs to be explicitly taught (Shaywitz, 2003 and Koda, 2007). It also develops over time on a certain continuum (Chall, 1983 cited in Henry, 2003). Furthermore, where second or foreign language acquisition is concerned, language transfer occurs at all stages and in all linguistic domains (Schneider and Evers, 2009). In addition, there seems to be a correlation between first language reading acquisition and foreign language acquisition (Kahn-Horwitz, Shimron and Sparks, 2005).

3. **EFL emergent readers** are children who are in the process of learning reading and writing (Graves, Juel and Graves, 1998). Intervention is crucial for those these children who, unlike their peers, fail to gain mastery of reading skills through classroom curricula and this needs to be done as early as possible (Schuele and Boudreau, 2008).

4. **Small group instruction** is perceived as a means to provide instructions designed to meet the needs of individual students in order to effectively enhance their learning. Through small group instruction teachers can answer the needs of emergent readers and promote their reading abilities (Diller, 2007).

5. **Multi-cultural learning environment** entails that learners are different in many ways thus inevitably diversity exists among students in any given classroom (Israel Ministry of Education, 2015). Moreover EFL learners by definition are native speakers of a different language and members of a different community and as such are influenced by different norms (Tomlnison, 2005). Language acquisition and socialization are both related to language acquisition and play a significant role in the development of language skills (Minami and Ovando, 2004). In addition, learning to read in a different language implies learning to engage in a different set of social practices that may conflict with readers' own social practices (Eskey, 2005). Therefore, in order to successfully promote reading abilities, cultural and linguistic identity should be recognized and related to by teachers (McNaughton, 2006).

This research is inductive in approach and draws on the theories that underpin these five components. The research collected evidence to advance an informed and evidence-based understanding that enlightens the influence of cultural factors on reading acquisition in EFL

A visual representation of the conceptual framework is introduced in Figure 1.

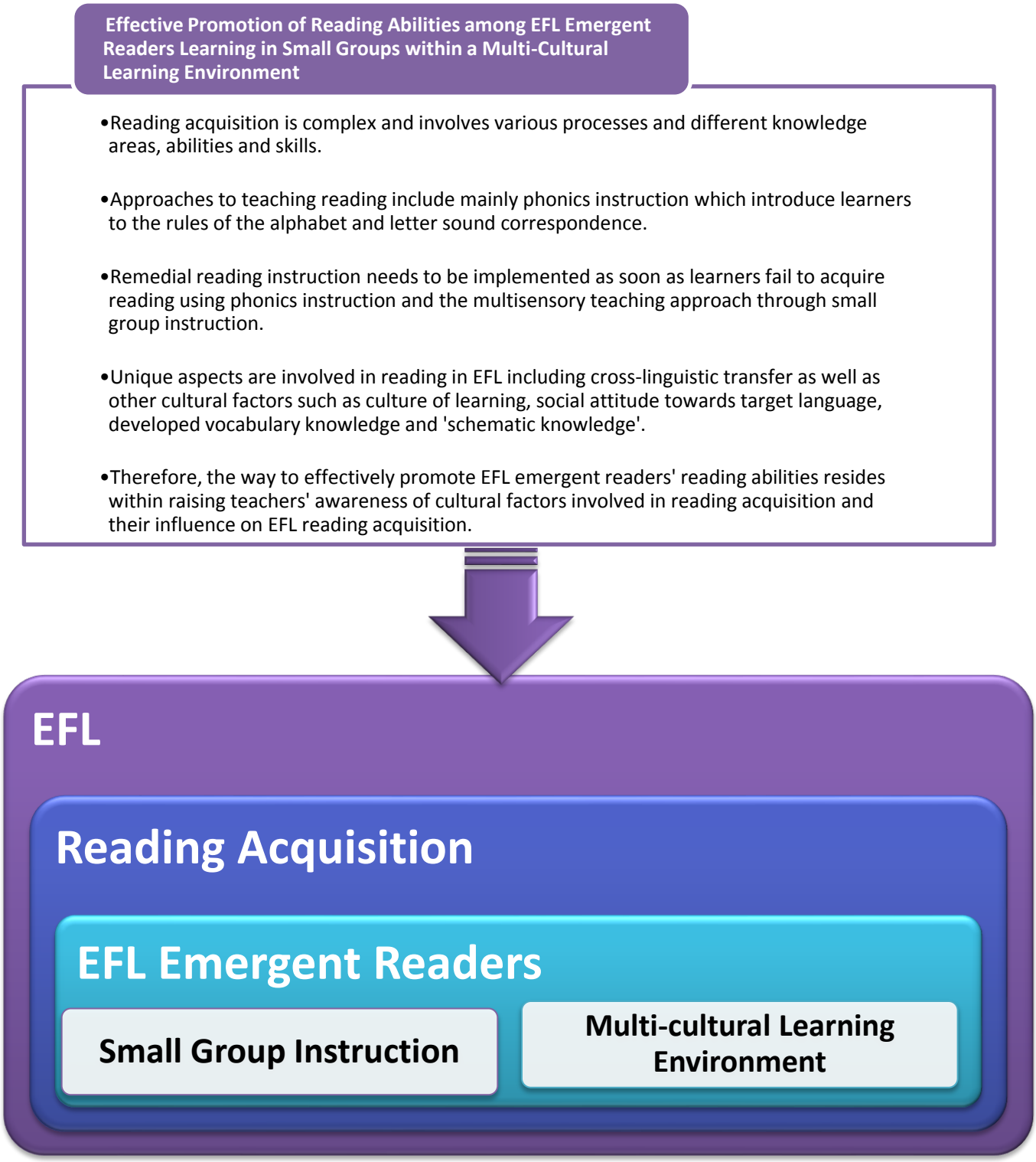


Figure 1: The theoretical foundation of this research

A 'nested target' model was selected to represent visually the unity of components that constitute the process and to show containment relationships between them. This conceptual framework model presents three related frameworks according to which one component – 'EFL' is presented in the outer framework, another component – 'Reading Acquisition' is presented in the second framework and the other three components are presented in the inner framework consisting of one major component 'EFL Emergent Readers', which contains the other two components, 'Small Group Instruction' and 'Multi-cultural Learning Environment'.

More specifically, the model shows how components involved in effective promotion of EFL emergent readers learning in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment interact and relate to each other. Given this, EFL is the general field of this research which more specifically is concerned with reading acquisition. Furthermore, the core of this research is learners who, unlike their peers, did not appear to acquire EFL reading and are referred to as EFL emergent readers. Therefore, these learners ought to receive small group instruction in order to answer their needs and promote their reading abilities. Naturally, small group instruction implies learning within a multi-cultural learning environment since every group consists of individuals who are different in various ways. Consequently, according to the model, 'Small Group Instruction' and 'Multi-cultural Learning Environment' are located at the centre of the inner framework since they both seem to be a basis for effective promotion of EFL emergent readers.

Ultimately, the research advanced an informed and evidence-based understanding of cultural factors that are involved in EFL reading acquisition in the Israeli context and is presented here as a case for better instruction of EFL reading to emergent readers. The goals of this research were achieved through using a mixed method approach combining quantitative and qualitative data, which provided an expanded understanding of the research problem and social reality (Creswell, 2009 and Wahyuni, 2012) and will be laid out in the following chapters.

The next chapter presents the research design and methodology implemented in this research.

CHAPTER II: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

II.1 The Research Paradigm and Approach

This study adopts the ***pragmatic*** position that emphasizes the problem as the significant factor in research and the use of pluralistic approaches to understand the problem and for collecting diverse types of data to provide better understanding of a research problem (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, the emphasis is on what works best to address the research problem being tested - in this research the problem being tested is, **what is the best way to effectively promote EFL emergent readers learning in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment**?

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data were combined in order to come to a better understanding of social reality (Wahyuni, 2012). The research approach is then ***mixed methods***. In this kind of research researchers combine quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language providing an expanded understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2009).

This study adopts the ***sequential mixed methods*** methodology, in which a researcher seeks to elaborate on the findings of one method with another method (Creswell, 2009). Thus, since the research was aimed at exploring and understanding a human phenomenon and the issues under study pertained to education and teaching English as a foreign language and as the study was conducted within educational settings - the respondents' natural surroundings, qualitative research methods were employed (Strauss and Corbin, 1991 and Creswell, 2009) adopting ***phenomenological research*** methodology (Creswell, 2009). Then, a quantitative research method adopting a ***survey research*** methodology was integrated with the intention of studying a sample of the relevant population in order to provide a numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions that will expand on the findings of the qualitative research method (Creswell, 2009). The next section will present the research design including the research aims and research questions.

II.2 The Research Design

The research aim was to depict **the best way to effectively promote EFL emergent readers learning in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment.**

The research has **two additional aims**:

* To investigate the procedures teachers use while promoting reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment.
* To develop a model for promoting emergent readers through small group instruction within a multi-cultural learning environment.

The research will address the following **research questions**:

1. What **perceptions** exist among teachers and experts regarding the promoting and hindering factors that promote and hinder learning to read in EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment?
2. What **procedures** do teachers use while promoting reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment?
3. How can **cultural factors influence reading acquisition in EFL**?

This research was conducted in three stages, with each stage designed on the basis of information collected inductively in the previous one (see Table 1). First, I interviewed well-known experts in the field of teaching reading as EFL in Israel to find out what they believed to be the effective ways to promote emergent readers in small groups. Then I observed teachers to get an impression of and form questions for the next research tool to ascertain issues related to how they integrate and promote emergent readers in small groups. I then interviewed those teachers. Based on the data collected through these observations and interviews with teachers and specialists, I designed questionnaires to be able to reach some generalizations with regard to teachers' perceptions regarding cultural factors affecting reading acquisition in EFL

Through this triangulation I wished to gather a rich data base and learn more about ways in which teachers worked with these learners and the rationale behind their work. The observations and interviews took place between September 2013 and April

2014. The questionnaire was sent out to teachers in July 2014. The study was conducted in Jewish and Arab schools in the Northern area of Israel.

Table 1: Mixed Methods (qualitative and quantitative)

Research Method	Aim	Research Tool	Research Population	Data Analysis
Qualitative research	**Exploring experts' perceptions** regarding factors that promote and hinder learning to read in EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment.	Semi-structured interviews	Four well known **experts in the field of teaching reading to EFL** students in Israel.	Content analysis
	Exploring teachers' practices regarding factors that promote and hinder learning to read in EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment**.**	Complete participant observations	**10 Jewish English teachers and 5 Arab English teachers** in the Northern region of Israel who use small group hours for promoting emergent readers and developing their reading abilities in their second year of EFL studies.	
	Exploring teachers' perceptions regarding factors that promote and hinder learning to read in EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment.	Semi-structured interviews	The **English teachers** that were observed (see above)	
Quantitative research	**Examining teachers' perception regarding the cultural factors affecting reading acquisition in EFL**. .	Closed-ended questionnaires (combined with a few open-ended questions). Using digital questionnaire	**45 Jewish and Arab English teachers** in the Northern area of Israel.	Statistical analysis

II.3 Research Hypothesis

Raising teachers' awareness to cultural factors involved in reading acquisition and their influence on EFL reading acquisition will ultimately lead to effective promotion of EFL emergent readers' reading abilities.

II.4 Research Population and Sampling

According to research, it takes about two and a half years of study in order to acquire basic reading skills in English (Seymour, Aro and Erskine, 2003). Moreover, it is crucial to apply an intervention program as soon as problems in reading are detected. Furthermore, in the schools that I intended to observe, teachers introduce reading in the second half of third grade or at the beginning of fourth grade. Therefore, the research focused on 5th grade English teachers in the Northern area of Israel, who promote reading through small group instruction. The main criterion for choosing these teachers was those who make efficient use of small group hours (based on recommendations of English inspectors and English teacher counselors) and preferably teachers who had taken part in in-service courses for receiving tools for coping with emergent readers in the classroom.

Thus, the research population included **60 English teachers** (Jewish and Arab) in the Northern area of Israel who use small group hours for promoting emergent readers and developing their reading abilities in their second year of EFL studies. In addition, in order to expand the inquiry, I was interested in exploring reading experts' points of view regarding the promotion of emergent readers learning EFL in small groups. Therefore I interviewed **4 well known experts in the field of teaching reading to EFL** students in Israel. Each one of these experts was chosen carefully to try and represent different aspects of reading acquisition – one is a linguist and researcher in the field of reading for struggling students, one is an expert in the field of reading theories, two are experts in methodology and teaching reading to EFL.

II.5 Research Methods

Since this is a mixed methods research, it implies that data will be gathered by using qualitative research tools as well as quantitative research tool. Therefore, I intend to use three different research tools: *observations*, *interviews* (qualitative research tools) and *questionnaires* (quantitative research tool).

- **Semi-structured interviews with Israeli experts in the field of EFL reading** with the aim of exploring their perceptions regarding factors that

promote and hinder learning to read in EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment.

- **Observations of English teachers** with the aim of exploring their practices regarding factors that promote and hinder learning to read in EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment, adopting the role of *participant–as-observer* .
- **Semi-structured interviews with English teachers** with the aim of exploring their perceptions regarding factors that promote or hinder learning to read in EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment.
- **Questionnaires** to examine teachers' **perception regarding cultural factors affecting reading acquisition in EFL**

By definition, in mixed methods research both quantitative and quantitative data is collected. This data is then analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. The next chapter will depict the data analysis methods that were used in this research for analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data.

II.6 Data Analysis Methods

There are different mixed methods data analysis approaches. In this research I implemented the instrumental development approach in which themes and statements are first gathered from participants using qualitative tools then specific items and statements are used to create a survey instrument that is grounded by the views of the participants (Creswell, 2009). In analyzing the qualitative data I adopted the *content analysis* approaches which includes searching-out underlying themes in the materials being analyzed (Bryman, 2012) and identifying patterns and themes within data using a coding method in which each core topic of each category is represented by a code or a label (Wahyuni, 2012).

Therefore, in this research I mapped the data I had collected while observing teachers by putting the different activities and procedures I had witnessed during the different lessons into one grid, using an observation schedule I had designed focusing on essential aspects of teaching reading. This way, significant issues that emerged were placed under the spotlight.

In addition, I mapped the answers given to the questions I had asked by putting them on a grid. Through content analysis, themes and categories were identified (see Figures 2-3) as they were related to the theories that underpin this research, the research questions and aims. In order to protect interviewee identities, real names were changed.

The next stage was quantitative analysis of the data collected from the questionnaire. *Cronbach's alpha* was used to measure internal consistency and reliability of inter-item correlations. This measure was used for multi-item scales to represent an average correlation between all items being questioned. It also enabled the creation of indices that include sets of variables having the same concept (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). In addition, since the sample in each categorical group was smaller than 30 the *Mann-Whitney U test* (a non-parametric equivalents of the *t-test*) was used to tune in and compare responses of relatively small samples. This test is a non - parametric test used to measure two independent samples comparing the number of times a score from one of the samples was ranked higher than a score from another sample (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

II. 7 Triangulation,

In this research there is methodological ***triangulation***, data was collected by using three different research tools – observations, interviews and a questionnaire. Accordingly data analysis was done using different methods. Thus, qualitative as well as quantitative data was collected from teachers and experts in order to examine their perceptions regarding the promotion of reading abilities among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment and the procedures teachers use while promoting reading acquisition among these learners in this context as well as teachers' perceptions regarding the cultural factors that influence reading acquisition in EFL. This was done in order to examine the problem from different angles to provide a solid base for the development of a model for promoting emergent readers through small group instruction within a multi-cultural learning environment.

II.8 Researcher's Position

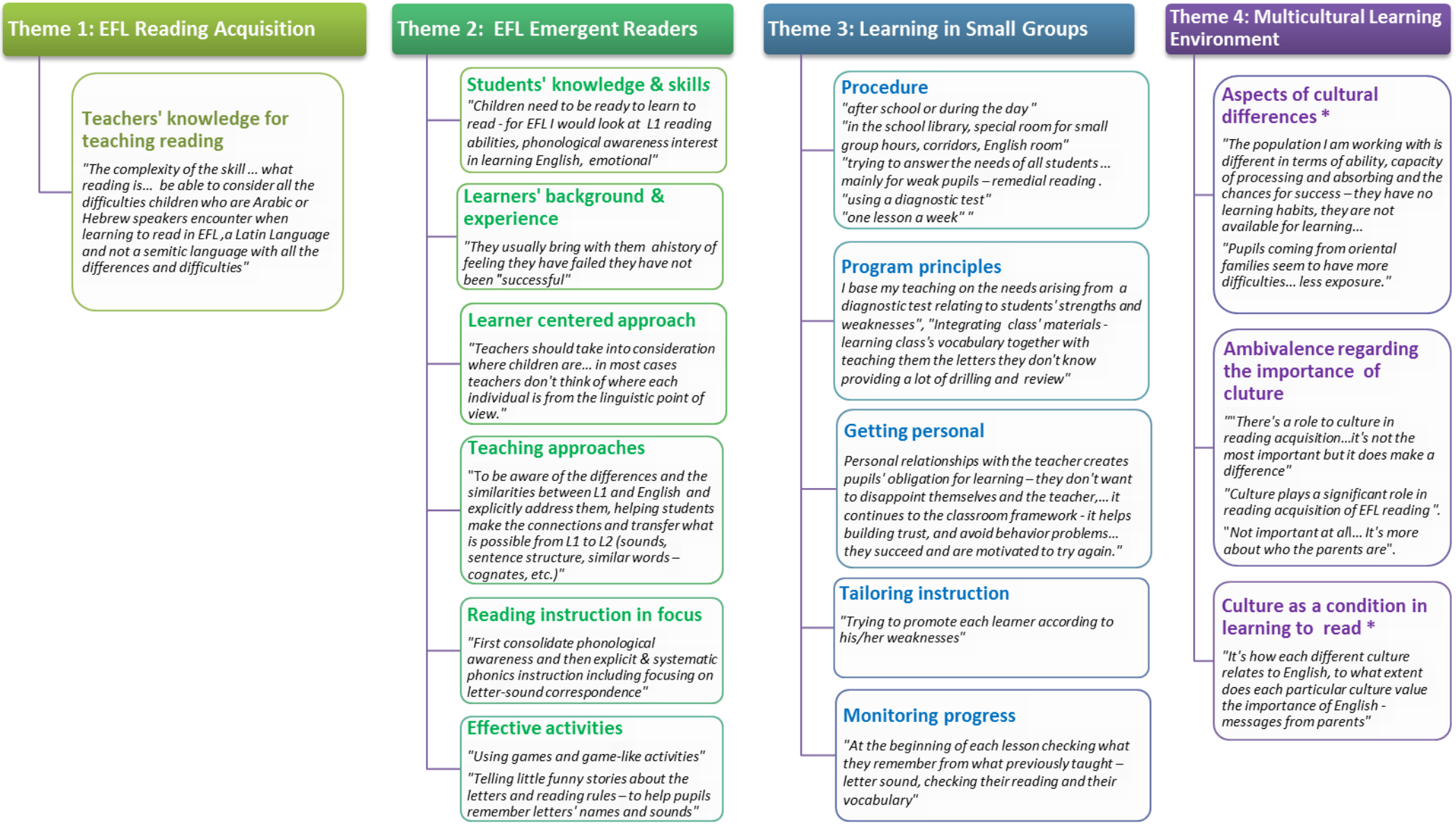
In this research I ensured that participants were informed and protected by scheduling observations and interviews ahead of time getting their approval, as well as that of their principals, ensuring my discretion about the content of observed lessons and interviews. In addition, being an 'insider', having experience and knowledge about the issues being studied, as well as having a prior professional role on one hand assisted in data collection and eliciting relevant information during observations and interviews mainly asking relevant clarification questions as needed and interpreting procedures observed. In addition, it helped me gain access to teachers and experts to be included in my research. On the other hand it made some teachers more suspicious and reluctant to participate in the research (especially in the Arab sector) and in a few cases to try to please me by providing answers they thought I might want to hear or presenting procedures they thought I was interested in observing. However, using different tools enabled me to compare between what teachers said and what they actually did and provided me with reliable and valid data.

CHAPTER III: FINDINGS

III. 1 Findings Emerging from Research Question 1: What perceptions exist among teachers and experts with regard to promoting and hindering factors of learning to read in EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment?

In order to answer this question, semi-structured interviews with English teachers and Israeli experts in the field of EFL reading were conducted. The questions in the interviews dealt with four aspects: EFL reading acquisition, EFL emergent readers, learning in small groups and multi-cultural learning environment. Figure 2 presents the themes and categories that emerged from content analysis

Figure2: Teachers' and experts' perceptions with regard to promoting and hindering factors in learning to read in EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment



Following are the integrated findings emerging from Research Question 1

1. **Teachers' knowledge** is critical for EFL reading acquisition**.** This finding is supported by quantitative findings that stress the effect of teachers' knowledge of learners' L1 and background on reading instruction

2. **Students' knowledge, background and experience** play a significant role in EFL reading acquisition when it comes to EFL emergent readers**.** This is supported by quantitative findings that highlight the effect of students' L1 background namely having a good base in L1 and the nature of pupils' L1.

3. Adopting a **learner centered approach** that includes 'getting personal', taking into consideration where each individual is from different perspectives, tailoring instructions accordingly and monitoring students' progress is critical for reading acquisition especially among EFL emergent readers. This is supported by quantitative findings which reflect the importance of taking students' cultural diversity into consideration when teaching reading to EFL emergent readers.

4. **EFL reading instruction** directed at emergent readers is characterized by systematic and explicit phonics instruction and practice using multisensory activities, mainly comparing and contrasting target language and students' L1. This finding is supported by quantitative research which puts an emphasis on relating to specific sounds in target language which do not exist in L1 during EFL reading instruction.

5. **The procedure of EFL small group instruction** is implemented in schools in different ways, forms, locations and time slots during the day and for different periods of time, primarily targeted at promoting emergent readers' reading abilities.

6. **Culture** seems to be **a condition in learning to read** particularly when it comes to a multi-cultural learning environment. Apparently different aspects of culture seem to have influence on EFL reading acquisition and need to be considered when introducing reading to EFL learners. This is supported by

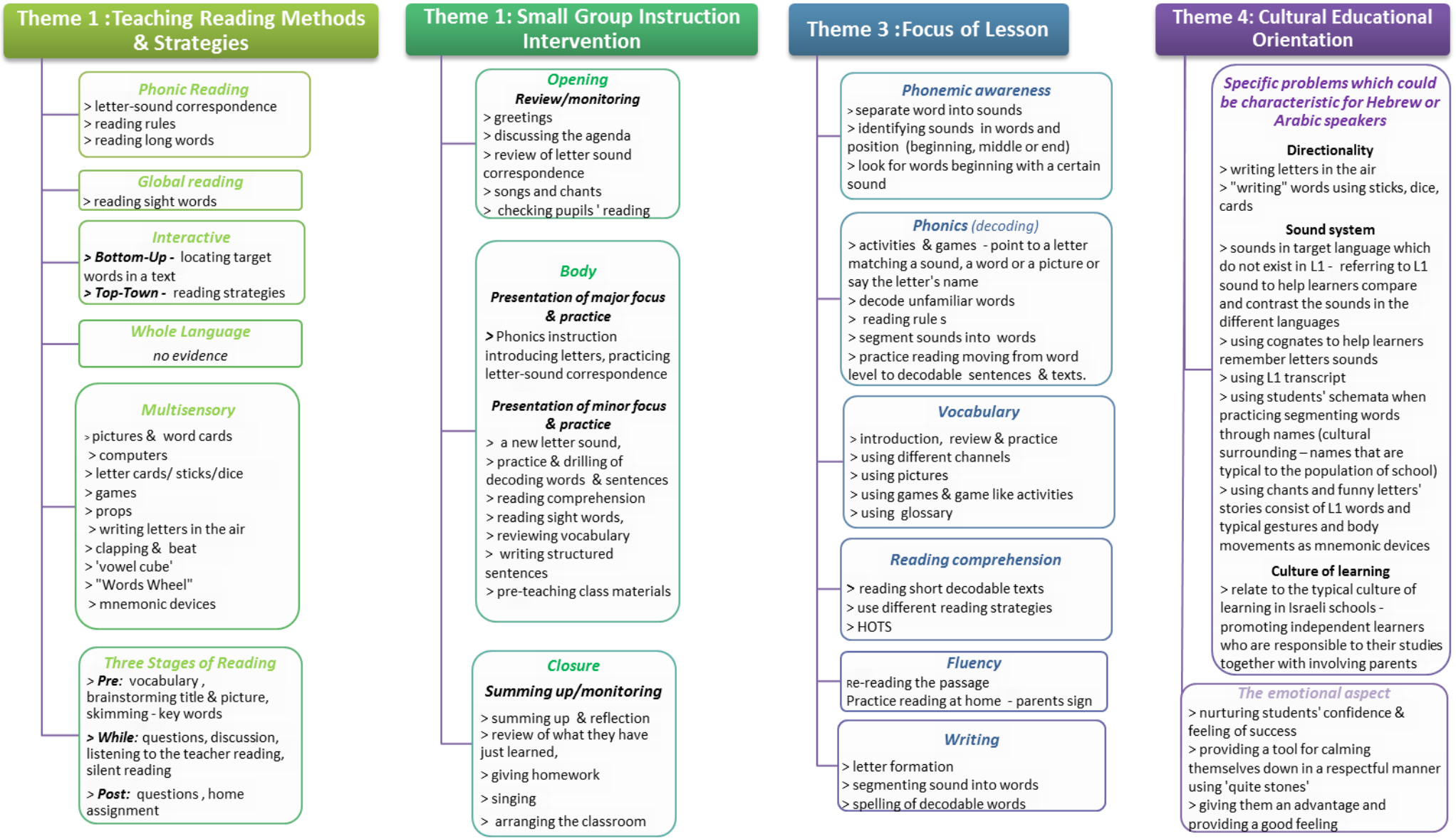
quantitative findings stressing the effect of students' L1 background and parents' intervention and attitude on EFL reading acquisition.

7. Culture seems to play a role in EFL reading acquisition however, there is an **ambivalence** regarding the extent of its significance. This is supported by quantitative findings showing teachers' ambivalence regarding parental involvement and influence in the process of EFL reading acquisition as well as teachers' perceptions regarding the need to attend to students' diversity during reading instruction.

III. 2 Findings Emerging from Research Question 2: What procedures do teachers use while promoting reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment?

In order to answer this question, observations of English teachers teaching EFL emergent readers in a small group framework were conducted. The observations dealt with four aspects as well: teaching reading methods and strategies, small group instruction intervention, focus of the lesson and cultural educational orientation. Figure 3 presents the themes and categories that emerged from content analysis. In this section I will relate to the latter, cultural educational orientation (theme 4), which is the focus of this research.

Figure 3: Teachers' practices regarding the promoting and hindering factors in learning to read in EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment



Following are the integrated findings emerging from research question 2:

1. Teachers seem to relate to different cultural aspects of the language namely to **specific problems which could be characteristic for Hebrew or Arabic speakers**. This is supported by quantitative findings reporting on teachers' incorporation of specific L1 cultural elements in reading instruction.

2. **The emotional aspect** plays a significant role in reading instruction of emergent readers.

III. 3 Findings Emerging from Research Question 3: How can cultural factors influence reading acquisition in EFL?

In order to answer this question, a digital questionnaire was sent to English teachers teaching EFL emergent readers in a small group framework in the northern region of Israel. The questionnaire dealt with five aspects: teachers' socio-demographic and professional characteristics, teachers' reflection on the tools with which they were provided at in-service courses in which they had taken part, teachers' awareness of cultural diversity among their small group students and students' different needs in this respect, teachers' integration and relation to cultural features of students' cultures and mother tongues and teachers' perceptions regarding the significance of considering students' cultural diversity within small group reading instruction.

Following are the integrated findings emerging from research question 3:

1. Quantitative research revealed that teachers were not provided with **tools for coping with specific issues related to cultural diversity** in in-service courses.

2. Quantitative research revealed that teachers perceived **in-services courses as a useful means** to enrich their theoretical as well as practical knowledge, raise

their awareness of different aspects and ultimately bring a change to their teaching.

3. Quantitative research revealed that teachers mostly did not perceive their small groups' students to be **culturally diverse.** This finding contradicted qualitative research findings that reflected diversity among students.

4. Quantitative research revealed that teachers perceived some of the **difficulties in EFL reading acquisition** experienced by their students to be **culturally related,** affected by L1 interference, students' personal experiences, students' home culture and ethnic origin. This finding was supported by qualitative research findings, which reflected teachers' perceptions regarding the significant role students' background and experience play in reading acquisition, as well as the influence different aspects of culture have on reading acquisition.

5. Quantitative research revealed that teachers mostly did not **take students' cultural diversity into account during small group EFL reading instruction.** This finding contradicted qualitative research findings that emphasized the implementation of a learner centered approach as being critical in the context of EFL emergent readers learning in small groups. However, quantitative research revealed that among Jewish teachers there seemed to be a correlation between the extent of cultural diversity among small group students and the extent to which they take students' cultural diversity into consideration during reading instruction.

6. Quantitative research revealed teachers perceived **consideration of students' cultural diversity during small group EFL reading instruction and vocabulary instruction** to be significant. This included teachers' understanding of what the most appropriate teaching method is for working with students of a certain cultural group.

7. Quantitative research revealed that teachers perceived **parental involvement** during the process of EFL reading acquisition not to be a very significant

factor in the promotion of their children's EFL reading abilities**.** This contradicted qualitative findings, which considered different aspects of culture including parents' knowledge, ability and willingness to support learning to have an influence on EFL reading acquisition and a factor to be considered during EFL reading instruction to emergent readers.

8. Quantitative research revealed that various factors **affected EFL reading instruction** primarily 'teachers' knowledge of their learners' background' and 'teachers' knowledge of pupils' L1'. This finding supported the qualitative findings relating to teachers' knowledge as a being critical for EFL reading acquisition.
9. Quantitative research revealed that Jewish teachers perceived the effect of **teachers' sensitivity to cultural differences** among their students to have a greater effect on EFL reading instruction compared to Arab teachers. Accordingly correlation was found between the extent of the influence that Jewish teachers' sensitivity to cultural diversity has on EFL reading instruction to the extent to which Jewish teachers encourage their students to compare to their L1, while among Arab teachers, no such correlation was found.

10. Quantitative research revealed that **students' social background, economical background, home cultural background as well as parental intervention and attitude** affected EFL reading acquisition. However, **parental intervention and attitude** seemed to have the highest effect. This finding partly contradicted qualitative findings which emphasized the significant role students' background play in reading acquisition including their social background.

The next chapter draws on the conclusions emerging from this research discussing the practical implication of this research and suggesting a practical model for promoting emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSIONS

IV.1 Factual Conclusions

- **Conclusions regarding research question no. 1: What perceptions exist among teachers and experts with regard to factors promoting and hindering learning to read in EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment?**

On the factual level, the evidence presented in this research showed that teachers and experts perceive various factors to be strongly linked to the promotion of EFL emergent readers learning to read in small groups within a multi-cultural environment. These factors can be divided into four main domains - student-related factors, student's home culture-related factors, teacher-related factors and policy makers-related factors.

With regards to **student-related factors,** students' background, knowledge and experiences, particularly those related to their culture and their L1 as well as students' L1 linguistic and literacy background were perceived to be strongly related to the promotion of EFL emergent readers learning to read in small groups within a multi-cultural environment.

With regards to **student's home culture related factors** two issues were perceived to be strongly related to the promotion of EFL emergent readers learning to read in small groups within a multi-cultural environment namely parents' intervention in the early stages of language acquisition and their attitudes towards literacy and EFL learning.

With regards to **teacher-related factors**, teachers' knowledge about reading processes and what is involved in them, including culturally related aspects and familiarity with learners' backgrounds and L1 was perceived to be strongly related to the promotion of EFL emergent readers learning to read in small groups within a multi-cultural environment**.** Other significant factors were teachers' adopted processes specifically a learner centered approach, applying a structured phonics instruction program focused on raising learners' awareness of similarities and differences between their L1 and the target language, English, activating learners and catering for their different learning styles and preferences by using multisensory approaches to teaching. Teachers'

knowledge and awareness of cultural diversity and its effect on reading acquisition was also perceived to be strongly related to the promotion of EFL emergent readers learning to read in small groups within a multi-cultural environment**.** In this sense teacher's practices and attitudes emerge as the most significant component influencing learners' EFL reading acquisition.

With regards to **policy makers-related** factors, teacher training as well as providing teachers with specific guidelines how to effectively exploit small group hours in order to promote learners' reading abilities were strongly related to the promotion of EFL emergent readers learning to read in small groups within a multi-cultural environment**.**

- **Conclusions regarding research question no. 2: What procedures do teachers use to promote reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment?**

On the factual level, the evidence presented in this research displayed that two main procedures targeted at promoting EFL emergent readers' reading abilities were used by teachers teaching reading in small groups within a multi-cultural environment: integration of different cultural aspects of the language, mainly relating to the differences between the languages, in their reading instruction and developing EFL emergent readers' self-confidence and self-esteem with the aim of increasing their motivation.

- **Conclusions regarding research question no.3: How do cultural factors influence reading acquisition in EFL?**

On the factual level, the evidence presented in this research indicated that different cultural factors affect reading acquisition in EFL. These factors can be divided into three main domains: student home culture-related factors, teacher-related factors and policy-maker related factors.

With regards to **students' home culture-related factors** parents' intervention in the early stages of language acquisition and parents' attitude to literacy were very significant in the context of reading acquisition in EFL**.**

With regards to **teacher-related factors** EFL teachers' ability to define what cultural diversity is and their awareness of their students' cultural diversity together with their

awareness of factors that affect EFL reading acquisition and their ability to provide differential and cultural sensitive literacy instruction were perceived to be critical factors in the context of EFL reading acquisition. Specifically, the extent to which teachers focus on comparing and contrasting L1 and English, enabling the transference of L1 skills and knowledge as well as the extent to which they attend to other culturally related difficulties of acquiring EFL reading acquisition. In addition, teachers' knowledge of learners' background and L1 and teachers' perceptions of the influence of their sensitivity to cultural diversity has on EFL reading instruction were also meaningful in this context. Finally, teachers' willingness and ability to be open to other sets of ideas that suit their EFL emergent readers and not to be fixed on their own cultural norms, behaviour and expectations was also considered a significant factor.

With regards to **policy-makers** lack of knowledge and awareness of culture-related issues discussed in in-service courses and other professional development frameworks were perceived to be significant in the context of EFL reading acquisition especially since teachers' professional development frameworks, such as in-service courses, are perceived by teachers as a powerful tool to affect their attitudes, expand their theoretical as well as practical knowledge and ultimately lead to change and more effective EFL reading instruction.

The next section presents the conceptual conclusions emerging from this research followed by a **PRMC model,** designed based on the findings of this research.

IV.2 Conceptual Conclusions

The conclusions emerging from this research guided the design of **the PRMC Model** a model for promoting EFL reading acquisition in multi-cultural environments (see Figure 4). The model is followed by a detailed description of its different components.

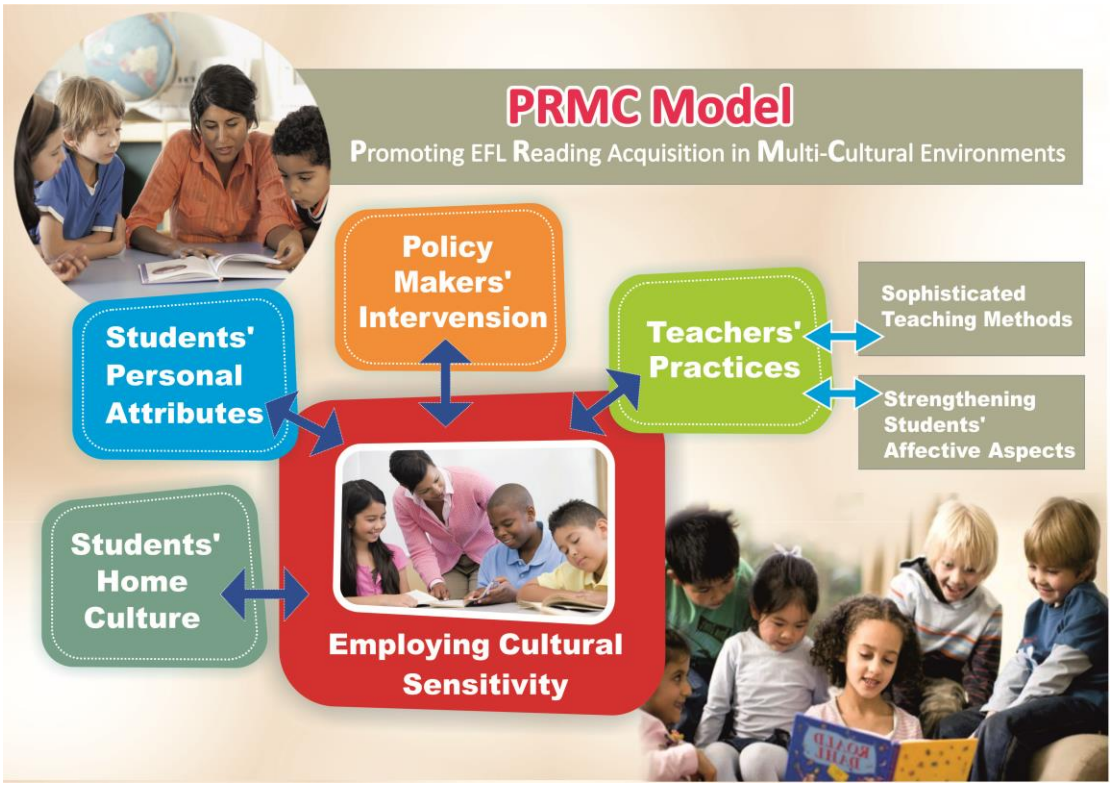


Figure 4: The PRMC Model

On the conceptual level, the findings of this research allow the emergence of a new theory as well as new practices with regard to dealing with reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment. Accordingly, this is perceived as an integrative and holistic process that takes ecological factors, mainly cultural teaching factors and cultural learning factors into consideration. This reflects a shift in perception since instead of considering learning materials and learning frameworks emphasis is placed on learners as a whole. In fact, reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment emerges from this study as an intercultural and interdisciplinary process that integrates different fields such as EFL teaching, EFL reading acquisition, teacher training and professional development and multicultural education and involves four main associates – students (emergent readers), their home culture, EFL teachers and policy makers. **The PRMC model** reflects these four associates and their contribution to employing cultural sensitivity. The model illustrates the significant of students' home culture and students' personal attributes in employing cultural sensitivity while acquiring reading in EFL. The model also emphasizes the significance of policy makers' intervention in this process.

Furthermore, the model underlines the role of the most significant component in this process – English teachers, as they implement the teaching process. Since teachers are the most valuable and influential resource in the school system, their use of cultural sensitivity in their practices using sophisticated teaching methods and strengthening students' affective aspects fostering their self-confidence and self-esteem will untimely result in promoting EFL reading acquisition in a multi-cultural learning environment.

V.3 Practical Implications and Recommendations

This section presents the implications resulting from the conclusions. These refer to different authorities that are involved in English teaching in Israel.

In order to achieve successful outcomes in reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural environment, the Ministry of Education and English inspectorate should acknowledge the significance of culture within the EFL reading context and examine English course books, EFL teachers training and professional development frameworks as well as EFL reading instruction guidelines.

1. Since Arab and Jewish schools in Israel use the same course books for teaching EFL, course book publishers' awareness to cultural differences that can hinder or promote EFL reading acquisition should be raised. Accordingly, course book writers should be guided to relate to L1 cultural differences going beyond simply using multicultural names and contexts but also focusing on differences between the languages. This can be done choosing cognates to be used to introduce letters sounds, focusing on problematic sounds, etc.

2. EFL teachers' cultural competence needs to be developed by raising their awareness of cultural diversity and its effect on reading acquisition and encouraging teachers to provide effective differential reading instruction to all learners taking their cultural backgrounds into consideration in order to promote emergent readers reading ability.

3. EFL teachers should be provided with knowledge and tools to help them define what cultural diversity is and how students are culturally diverse.

4. Professional development frameworks for EFL teachers should be created in order for teachers to be equipped with theoretical and practical knowledge of reading instruction with regards to cultural factors affecting EFL reading acquisition as well as culturally related practical tools for promoting reading abilities of emergent readers learning to read in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment. Thus, in-service courses should be used as a platform to enrich teachers' knowledge regarding the cultural factors effecting EFL reading acquisition and lead to changes in perceptions and practices.

5. The English Inspectorate needs to provide teachers with ideas and guidelines for dealing with speakers of other languages focusing on basic differences and similarities between English and Hebrew and Arabic as well as other languages together with some practical (unbiased) tips and recommendations regarding cultural factors that can hinder or promote reading acquisition such as cultures of learning, relating to typical teaching and learning approaches and strategies, home culture, etc.. This can be done by involving inspectors, counselors and teachers in collecting all these tips using a collaborative digital tool such as the chief inspectorate's website or Facebook page.

IV.4 Future Research

This research examined reading acquisition among EFL emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment and suggested an applied model for promoting these readers in this framework. Therefore, future research may examine the application of this model in a small group. In addition, EFL teachers' perceptions and practices regarding EFL reading acquisition in a classroom framework may be examined. Finally, comparative research may examine the application of the model in small groups in comparison to the application of the same model in a classroom framework.

IV.5 Research Limitations

The research method chosen for this research was mixed methods. Therefore the first stage of this research included qualitative research using qualitative research tools such as observations and semi-structured interviews. As previously mentioned qualitative research, by its nature, has high validity and low reliability and thus cannot be generalized to other populations. Hence, this qualitative research represents a sample of the population of Elementary School English teachers in the northern region of Israel. However, when choosing the sample of observed and interviewed teachers I made sure to have a variety of teachers in terms of age, cultural background, teaching experience and type of school - this was done in order to try and achieve a degree of **generalization** about a larger population. In addition, using a mixed method approach where quantitative research followed the qualitative research and having triangulation of research tools using questionnaire with a different sample of teachers reinforced and extended the findings and allowed generalizability.

As for the **researcher's position**, since the researcher herself was part of the population being examined there was a possible bias in the research. In order to try to reduce and neutralize the involvement of the researcher in the first stage of the research, I avoided responding to the participants in any judgmental way during interviews and adopted a 'fly on the wall' technique during the observation. In addition, I used anonymous digital questionnaires that were distributed by e-mail.

The last section depicts the importance of this research and its contribution to knowledge in the area of reading acquisition among emergent readers learning EFL in small groups within a multi-cultural learning environment

IV.6 Contribution to Knowledge

This research sought to fill a gap in knowledge regarding the acquisition of EFL reading of emergent readers in a small group framework within a multi-cultural learning environment. Contribution to theoretical knowledge was made in this domain. As mentioned earlier, this study yielded the PRMC model which may lead to a change in perceptions with regard to dealing with this type of reader in this particular framework and emphasizes the significant role of cultural factors in EFL

reading acquisition context. Additionally, the PRMC model is suggested as an innovation emerging from this research, therefore, the study is original and innovative.

The innovation of this study is reflected in a few aspects. First, the conceptual framework of this research is unique - no research was found to examine culture in the context of EFL emergent readers' reading acquisition in small groups in a multi-cultural learning environment. Moreover, both research design and research tools were designed by the researcher for the purpose of this study and thus are innovative. In addition, the research population is exclusive since no research was found to examine teachers of small group hours in EFL in elementary schools in the north of Israel. Furthermore, data analysis was also innovative in a sense that it was affected by interpretations based on the researcher's knowledge and experience. The findings emerging from this research resulted in developing new insights and perceptions with regard to the issue being examined and reflect the contribution to theoretical and practical knowledge in the domain of reading acquisition in EFL within small groups and a multi-cultural learning environment.

Contribution to practical knowledge was made by providing the EFL teaching community beyond the boundaries of Israel with an innovative model for promoting reading abilities among emergent readers learning to read in EFL in small groups in a multi-cultural learning environment. In addition, the conclusions resulting from this research call for raising awareness of the significance of cultural factors in EFL reading acquisition among policy makers, mainly the English inspectorate and EFL teachers and providing them with knowledge, tools and guidelines in order to provide culturally sensitive literacy instruction. These conclusions may lead to a change in EFL language education policy in Israel if adopted by the English inspectorate. This implies allocating resources in order to develop professional development frameworks in this domain. Furthermore, if it was adopted by policy makers in the Ministry of Education, it could change EFL teacher training policy in Israel and around the globe.

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