

## Abstract

Families, schools and stakeholders long for developing good readers (Ponitz & Rimm-Kaufman, 2011) and would do all it takes to save young children from becoming illiterate or low achievers (Anthony & Farnic, 2005; Share & Stanovich, 1995; Snowling, 1998). Since The landmark study of Moats (1994), a flow of research has targeted teacher education advocating for teachers being competent in PA (Carlisle, Kelcey, Rowan, & Phelps, 2011; Kennedy, 2013; Washburn et al., 2017). EFL teachers' proficiency seems to contribute to the reading difficulties that early graders encounter. This paper investigates the knowledge, beliefs, practices and awareness in phonological awareness (PA) of two hundred and ten randomly selected EFL in-service teachers and then examines the impact of teachers' experiences, qualifications, and gender on shaping teachers' instruction. The researchers used a four-section survey to collect teachers' demographic information, perceived and actual knowledge of phonological awareness and classroom practices related to PA, phonics, and syllabication. The results reported teachers as moderate level in the beliefs, practice and awareness of PA. In terms of teachers' knowledge in PA, however, results showed teachers lacking the basics in teaching reading. This study adds to the body of literature and sheds light on the status quo of EFL in-service teachers' competency and brings to the attention of every stakeholder the critical role EFL teachers play in helping EFL children become readers. Although the results point towards teachers as possible cause behind children's low-literacy level, this study raises important questions for further investigations, and implications for EFL teacher education and preparation are highlighted.

## Introduction

Teachers assume an undeniable role in the development of children's literacy (Hindman & Wasik, 2008; Lee, Cawthon & Dawson, 2013). Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), literacy bar in the United States has been on the rise for schools holding them accountable for helping children read at the appropriate grade level. In the case of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), achieving grade-level literacy creates a challenge for EFL children. Research demonstrates that a child equipped with substantial knowledge and skills in PA has a better opportunities of becoming a good reader than a child who is not (Cárnio, Vosgrau & Soares, 2017). In fact, Yopp (1992) stresses the children's need to develop an awareness of and skills in manipulating the language sounds and that PA is the part that the majority of young learners lack the most. This in fact points fingers at the classroom instruction to reason whether the quality of instruction children receive in their classrooms help or delay their emergence into reading, a situation that shifts responsibility to classroom teachers and holds them accountable. In 1994, Moats led a study to investigate teachers' efficiency to teach reading; Moats reported that teachers did face difficulties when answering questions on basics in reading. Those results attracted the attention of scholars in the field and led a flow of research investigating teachers' adequacy to teach reading (Kennedy, 2013). Unfortunately, the findings of such research studies confirmed Moats' statement; several researchers expressed their concern for seeing some teachers confused about some fundamentals in PA and unaware of its relationship with developing reading skills (Moats, 2009; Washborn, Mulcahy & Musante, 2017). Ponitz and Rimm-Kaufman (2011) argue that teachers should be accountable for the quality of literacy instruction they deliver in their classrooms.

Therefore, this research paper grounds itself within the framework of the National Reading Panel (2000) and the subsequent research that perceive PA as a key component in the development of reading skills.

Table 1. The Distribution of Teachers' Gender, Qualifications, and Experiences.

| variable           | Qualification          | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------------|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Gender             | Male                   | 109       | 52      |
|                    | Female                 | 101       | 48      |
| Qualification      | Bachelor (BA)          | 160       | 76.2    |
|                    | BA and Higher Diploma  | 22        | 10.5    |
|                    | Masters (MA) and above | 28        | 13.3    |
| Experience (years) | 1-3                    | 68        | 32.2    |
|                    | 4-7                    | 35        | 16.6    |
|                    | 8-11                   | 52        | 24.6    |
| Total              | 210                    | 55        | 26.1    |

## Methods and Materials

Two hundred and ten (F=101, M=109) in-service EFL language teachers participated in the study. Participants were solicited from either the graduate courses they were enrolled in or were reached in their schools. All participant teachers graduated from English language departments from different universities in the country. The researchers administered a four-part modified survey version of Preschool Literacy Practices Checklist (Burgess et al, 2001). The four components included demographic information, teachers' knowledge, beliefs and practices of PA. Teachers' actual knowledge of PA was measured using a modified version of phonics pretest (Dow & Baer, 2006). The pretest included questions from three categories of early literacy development related to phonological awareness, phonics, and syllabication. Teachers responded to the 24-item test through identifying, locating and counting sounds in words in a multiple-choice format. Each correct response weighs one point out of 24. In the case of beliefs, awareness and practices of PA, teachers were asked to indicate their level of agreement to various statements using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree=1, to strongly agree=5. The entire survey took approximately thirty-five minutes to complete. The tool was checked for validity through consulting a panel of three university professors and five teachers in the field EFL. All recommendations and suggestions were used to modify the questionnaire and produce the final version. For reliability purposes, the researchers administered the tool to a group of 30 teachers and administered it again after 15 days. The correlation coefficient between the test-retest was computed yielding 0.84, a value considered acceptable for the purpose of the study.

## Results

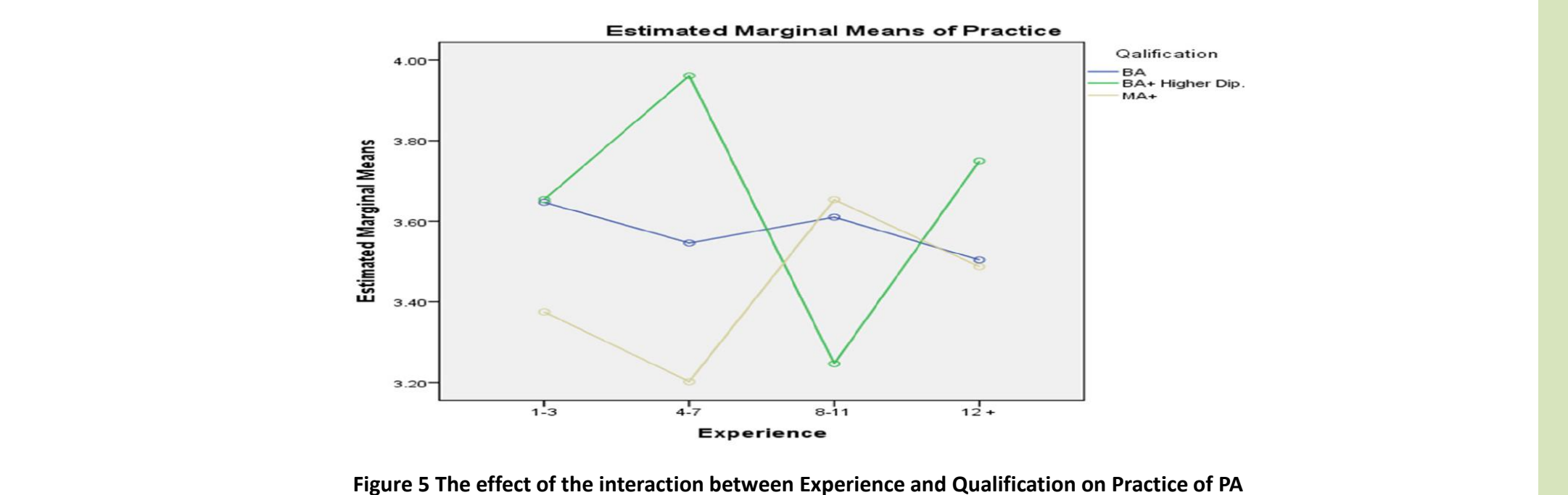
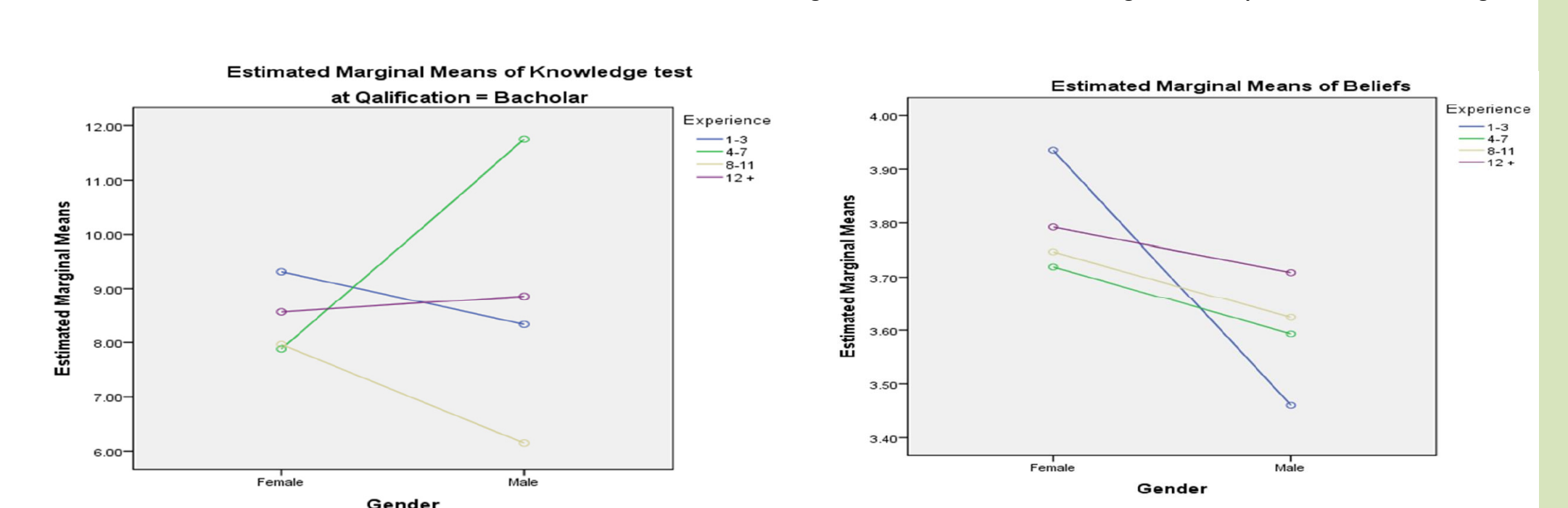
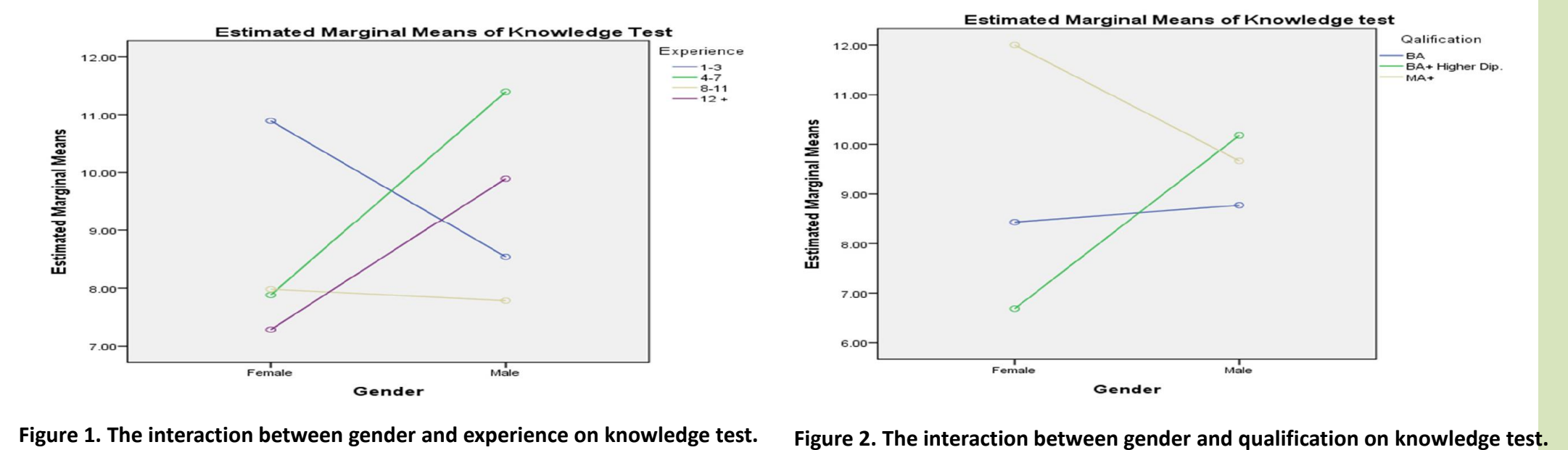
Question One. What do EFL teachers' report in terms of their knowledge, their beliefs, their awareness and their teaching practices associated with PA? Results indicated that most participants' responses were very low. The top participants' response was item three that asks whether students' ability to recognize letters should be considered as a strong predictor of early reading success (M= 4.10, SD= .79). Participants' lowest response was on item six, "Phonemic awareness and phonics mean essentially the same thing" (M= 3.10, SD= 1.00). Concerning the phonological awareness, participants' responses were relatively moderate with an average of 3.12, and SD=.71. Participants' highest response was on item 10, "I know how to teach segmenting," while their lowest response was on item eleven, "I know how to teach blending." Concerning practices, responses were relatively high with an average of 3.59, and SD=.51, with lowest mean response on, "When teaching, I don't differentiate between phonemic awareness and phonics. Question Two. Are there any statistically significant differences in EFL teachers' PA knowledge beliefs, awareness, and practice due to gender, experience and academic qualifications? Upon running the MANOVA test, the Wilks' Lambda results did show significant differences (P<0.05). MANOVA revealed a significant multivariate main effect for gender, Wilks'  $\lambda = .89$ ,  $F = 5.75$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , partial eta squared = .11. Also, experience yielded a Wilks'  $\lambda$  of = .82,  $F = 3.16$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , partial eta squared = .06. Univariate F tests were performed to look at each dependent variable in turn to see if the independent variable has a significant impact on them separately. Accordingly, gender was a factor that plays a significant role with the higher means for females.

Post hoc tests showed significant differences only between teachers with (4-7) years of experience and teachers with (8-11) years of experience on knowledge. In terms of beliefs, post hoc test shows significant differences only between teachers of (4-7) and 12+ years of experience, with the later outperforming the first.

The univariate analyses of the effect of the interaction of gender with experience, showed significant effect on knowledge, beliefs and practices. Likewise, the interaction between experience and qualification showed significant effect on knowledge, beliefs and practices. In addition, the interaction between gender, experience and qualification showed significant effect on knowledge, beliefs and practices. While, the interaction between gender and qualification showed significant effect only on knowledge and practice (F=5.40, 3.83, respectively). All reported F values are at  $p < 0.05$ . Finally, post hoc comparisons did not follow regular patterns. Plot Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 demonstrate lack of regularity.

Table 2. MANOVA Test Results.

| Effect                              | Wilks' Lambda | F    | Sig. |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|------|------|
| Gender                              | .89           | 5.75 | .000 |
| Experience                          | .82           | 3.16 | .000 |
| Qualification                       | .94           | 1.61 | .120 |
| Gender* Experience                  | .75           | 4.82 | .000 |
| Gender * Qualification              | .86           | 3.61 | .000 |
| Experience * Qualification          | .73           | 2.57 | .000 |
| Gender * Experience * Qualification | .88           | 6.69 | 0.00 |



## Discussion

In general, the findings of this study pertinent to the first question indicate that most EFL teachers lack the basics in reading instructions. For example, for EFL teachers to fail to recognize the differences between phonics and phonemic awareness indicates that teachers do not offer a rich environment and practices that provide opportunities for children to play with the sounds of the language. This in turn indicates a shortage in teachers' repertoire of the knowledge, skills and strategies. This echoes similar findings in the literature where researchers raised concerns about teachers being confused about certain fundamentals in PA and were unable to link that to the development of children's reading skills (Moats, 2009; Washborn, Mulcahy & Musante, 2017). The results of this study concerning participants' knowledge in PA were surprising and concerning. The majority of the teachers could not pass the knowledge test. One would conclude that instead of providing adequate instruction, these EFL teachers disservice children and contribute to their failure.

## Conclusions

The landmark study of Moats (1994) revealed deficits in teacher preparation, teachers' knowledge and beliefs, and handed the bell for further studies. Since then, a flow of research has targeted teacher education advocating for teachers being competent in PA (Carlisle, Kelcey, Rowan, & Phelps, 2011; Kennedy, 2013; Moats, 2009; Washburn et al., 2011a, 2011b; Washburn et al., 2017). The findings demonstrated that most EFL teachers lack the basics in teaching children how to read. Findings reported gender and experience as plausible factors that would affect EFL teachers' instruction. Results also reported EFL teachers using more of their previous experiences to guide their classroom instruction. The study sheds light on the status quo of EFL in-service teachers' competency and brings to the attention of every stakeholder the critical role EFL teachers play in helping EFL children become readers. The researchers extend their recommendations to all stakeholders to consider the results and call for a comprehensive review of the curriculum, textbooks and teacher education programs. The researchers also call for more research to further investigate the reasons behind EFL children's struggle in becoming good readers of English language.

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