

The Impact of a Balanced Literacy Program on the Gradual Release of the Instructor's Accountability

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ABSTRACT

Under no circumstances can anyone argue with the eminent saying, “A child who reads will be an adult who thinks.” Literacy does matter. It’s never a privilege; it is a right. Every child has the right to understand the significance of being educated as it needs hard work as well as persistence to pay off. Therefore, literacy is crucial to any progress and advancement. The purpose of this study is to show how young learners can, eventually, sustain, tolerate, and then master balanced and effective literacy independently. Instructors can gradually release their responsibility in order to set their learners free to learn autonomously. To reach this level, several steps and phases will be highlighted as well as taken into consideration. This research paper presents literacy aspects to be studied within appropriate settings and learning environments; suitable curricula, and applicable time and framework. The study engaged mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative approaches) and analytical methods where surveys, observations, facts, and many measurements are markedly deliberated by the researcher through interviews held by an amount number of teachers and a questionnaire that was distributed online. The researcher, then, received and analyzed all the answers delivered. The results reveal that a balanced and effective literacy program has a positive impact on learners to work and learn independently. Learners will also be able to use different strands in contexts across the curriculum especially when it is held professionally, proactively, and under regular observations. Finally, the study approves the gradual release of the instructor's responsibility while delivering teaching methods and giving the learners the opportunity to be independent.

keywords: balanced literacy, instructor's accountability, learner's independence

1. Introduction

It is way easier to build a strong and durable pre-schooler than to repair a shattered “high schooler”. Recently, instructors are complaining almost all the time because of their students’ recklessness. Students are becoming very hesitant and they don’t show any interest in the subject they are dealing with. However, it is proven that students lose concentration on the concepts they don’t usually understand. They feel indignant as they sense their inabilities. There is nothing harder than a young and malleable individual who feels incapable of controlling what is expected to be controlled. Nevertheless, it is not a maddening issue for the learners only, but also for teachers and educators as they are mostly responsible. Those who blame only learners for their learning tardiness should definitely think twice. The problem doesn’t begin the moment this learner steps into the intermediate level but it is entirely linked to the moment he/she steps into the school itself. Primary levels are considered the bedrock of balanced educational development for all learners at all levels (Barnett, 2002). What makes the high schooler, is actually the pre-schooler. The stronger the educator builds, the firmer the

learners become, and here comes balanced literacy. Usually, elementary teachers are well aware of the concept of “Balanced Literacy” simply because it is the most significant aspect to take into consideration while planning, demonstrating, teaching, and evaluating. The whole curriculum revolves around this vital concept as it integrates the bedrock of the learner’s ability to become literate. Balanced literacy consists of seven essential components: vocabulary and language, phonological awareness, knowledge of print, letters, and words, comprehension, books, and other texts, and literacy as a source of enjoyment (Heroman & Jones, 2004). Hence, Literacy education goes so much beyond a curriculum; it basically builds a personality through improving skills and due to its indispensable role, learners can develop themselves gradually to reach their educational destinations.

Educational systems, despite their differences, are very similar in classifying grade levels and cycles. Generally, there are four continuous and inseparable academic levels: preschool, primary school, middle school, and high school. The problem occurs when high school learners encounter certain learning issues that should have been solved since they were in the primary level. The primary level is the bedrock of all other levels. Neither educators nor parents should underestimate this level as it is considered the critical age for the learner’s mind to absorb all information and store them precisely in their brains.

A balanced and effective literacy program is a long-term strategy that educators can use to develop and improve their teaching and learning process. It is crucial to emphasize the combination of two significant approaches when it comes to a balanced literacy program. The science of reading and decoding skills (Riley, 2020). To begin with, some might think that the pre-schooler stage is a flexible- easy level anyone can teach; which is not true. This stage is the most needed for specialists and experts in educational concepts. Teachers must be aware that through a great literacy program, they will tackle several strands and aspects of their teaching process. They have to take into consideration details regarding setting, environment, learners, and most importantly, strategies. Quite simply, these strategies will grant equal and balanced attention to reading and writing instructions (Beverstein, 2005). Balanced Literacy Program (BLP) is prearranged to provide a significant instructional and organizational framework as it is responsible for spreading outstanding models of writing and reading behavior, it is systematic and works on the learners’ skills and intentions. Furthermore, it tackles literature that is so important for learners’ knowledge and critical thinking; not to forget the essential target of assessment and evaluation. It is mandatory to mention here that a literacy program is able to provide learners with utmost independence as they learn to read and write. It is crucial that they are able to gradually learn solely without the instructor’s step-by-step monitoring.

The purpose of the study is to show that learners can reach a point where they are considered independent in the learning process. They can gradually take the lead with the instructor’s help. The degree of control will shift from the instructor to the learner progressively.

1.1. Balanced Literacy Components

A great balanced literacy program must encompass six essential components phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing.

1. Phonemic Awareness: is the ability to know that the word you hear is made up of a series of detached sounds. This awareness is so significant not only for learning English but also for any language that has an alphabetical system. Phonemic awareness will help kids recognize printed words and identify the sounds in the spoken ones. Also, teaching phonemic awareness helps the instructors distinguish students who have trouble reading and writing.

2. **Phonics Instruction:** is teaching kids that every sound belongs to a letter and a letter pattern. In teaching languages, children need to recognize the sound of the letter before knowing the name of the letter. This helps kids to decode words based on recognizing sounds. Phonics instruction is highly important and has a long-term impact on the learner's understanding of any word.

3. **Vocabulary:** it is the ability to know the word and the meaning it has. Teaching vocabulary enhances the child's ability to acquire language through understanding words and their meaning. In fact, the more vocabulary a child attains the better their abilities to comprehend fluently and read independently.

4. **Fluency:** is a child's ability to easily, effortlessly, and correctly speak, read, and write the language. "Fluency in reading should include consistent speed, accuracy, and the use of the proper expression" (Jones, 2016). Fluency is accomplished when children are no longer concentrating on how to read. "Fluency is linked directly to comprehension, and once it is achieved, a student can start focusing on the meaning of what they read" (Jones, 2016). In order to achieve fluency, an educator should go through phonemic awareness and instruction as well as cover vocabulary.

5. **Comprehension:** when it comes to comprehension, reading and writing are considered essential and significant. Comprehension shows the ability of a child to understand what he/she reads. This also conveys written aspects as well. Thus, comprehension mingles reading and writing together.

6. **Writing:** educators are used to teaching reading and writing separately. This has to be changed in all educational systems. Writing happens when a child is able to generate a text. When children write, they improve their phonemic awareness and phonics instructions; when older students write, they are able to understand the miscellaneous types of texts they read.

1.1.1. Balanced Literacy Approaches

Little do experts know that the various names of balanced literacy led to several approaches as well. Educators' concerns were to cover everything the learner needs at all levels. Thus, many approaches were generated with so many objectives and targets. The first balanced literacy approach was called "The Four Blocks Literacy Model". It integrates four different aspects to be taught every day to children. According to Patricia Cunningham and Dorothy Hall, the creators of this model, these strategies and activities will help all children become better readers and writers as well (Hall, Cunningham, & Sigmon, 1999). The four-block literacy model gives children the opportunity to apply several reading and writing skills on daily basis. These skills will be granted through "Guided Reading", "Self-Selected Reading", "Writing", and "Working with Words". Educators need to be trained on how to use the four-block literacy model and how to teach it to their kids.

1.1.1.1. Balanced Literacy and the 21st Century Skills

Balanced literacy term isn't new to education. Old educational curricula do take literacy programs into consideration. However, the concept of 21st-century skills made educators think twice about literacy and the various strategies they have to follow/generate while teaching kids how to read and write. Balanced literacy now isn't analyzed and seen the same way as it was before and this helped, in one way or another, improve teaching and learning processes. Nevertheless, old concepts and strategies cannot be fully omitted. Educators and professionals were able to scaffold; what they did is building on prior knowledge and improve the balanced literacy approach. Thus, this approach has been adjusted and modified based on the children's needs, curricula requirements, and 21st-century necessities. Gail Tompkins, a professor at

California State University, stated in her book “Literacy for the 21st Century: A Balanced Approach” that there was a noticeable emphasis on developing literacy strategies in the last 10 years (Tompkins, 2018). Moreover, it was clear that the essence of a balanced literacy approach is to introduce children to critical thinking, collaboration, leadership, and college-career readiness. Thus, there are three instructional levels for balanced literacy.

1. Whole group instruction: it happens when the teacher gives unified instruction to the whole class. For example, the teacher asks all students to read a particular part in a reading lesson. Afterward, the teacher, along with the students, starts a classroom discussion where all students can participate and answer the delivered questions. This instructional level has many benefits like involving almost all students in the teacher and learning process, all students benefit from the material reviewed and discussed, and the teacher can ask encouraging questions, especially to those who hesitate to participate in class. Angela Cooper, a classroom teacher, used the whole group instruction method in her class and realized that students were more expressive while they were exchanging ideas with their peers (Cooper, 2017). Despite the benefits of the whole group instruction, it also has some drawbacks. Some students need peer support; they can learn and understand better when things are explained by their classmates. This can never be provided at the whole group instructional level.

2. Differentiated (small groups) instruction: Small-group instruction provides an environment for instructors to offer students wide opportunities to express what they know and obtain feedback from other students as well as the teacher. The best part about this instructional level is that it uses differentiated and personalized strategies to reach all students despite their different needs and potentials. Teachers, as they monitor the grouping process, are able to give feedback to every group and every student. Thus, students gain their peer support as well as the teachers. it is important to mention here that small group instruction enhances the concept of collaboration and provides great confidence for all types of learners.

3. Independent student work: after all the teacher’s guidance and support, learners reach a point when they hold responsible for what they learn. Educators need to motivate and encourage students to search, inquire, and analyze. This will help them realize the significance of the work they do and they reach independent learning. Usually, the independent level requires an easy start. Students are familiar with the material they are learning. They might face 1 or two unfamiliar words which they have to ask about it and search for their meaning.

1.1.1.1.1. **Balanced Literacy and the Gradual Release/ Collaboration**

One of the most significant theories of an effective and balanced literacy program is the gradual release of the instructor’s accountability. The teaching and learning process starts when the teacher introduces a skill/ concept “I DO”; then the learning process gradually moves to the student’s responsibility. When students are held responsible, they start with the teacher’s guidance till they reach a point when the teacher’s support is no longer needed. Thus, they shifted from “We Do” (the teacher and the students) to “You DO” (the students independently.)

The above strategy worked perfectly until the educators Anita Archer, John Hollingsworth, and John Fleming realized the importance of a new phase to be embedded within. Collaborative learning is essential to the teaching and learning process and fits 21st-century skills perfectly. Collaborative learning happens when students work together and support each other. it is so beneficial when students think, pair, share, and inquire with their peers; they can actually teach each other and learn from each other. Thus, the “You Do” model now consists of four phases:

1. I Do □ the teacher
2. We Do □ the teacher and the students

3. You Do Together □ the students together (Collaborative learning)
4. You DO Independently □ the student

The model emphasizes the necessity of openly teaching and supporting learners before expecting them to complete a task on their own (Killian, 2015). Moreover, educators need to be aware of their students' learning acquisition. Based on the student's mastery, teachers will decide to move back and forth between steps. Some other times, you may use all the phases in one single lesson (Killian, 2015).

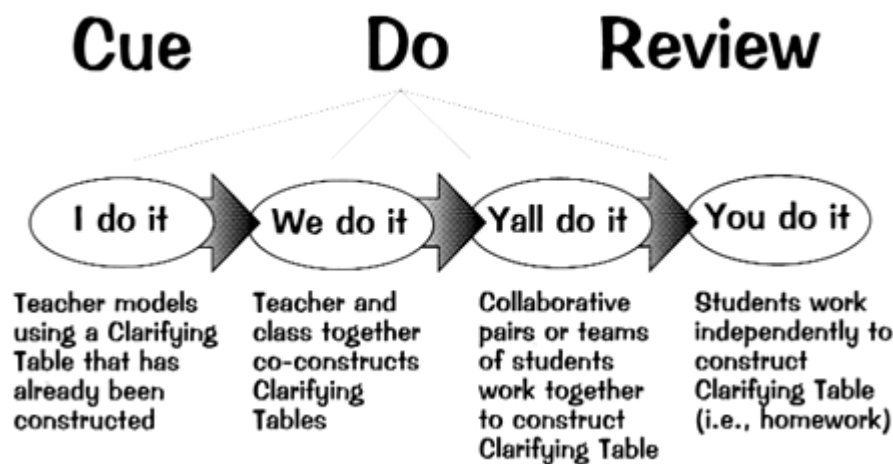


Figure 1: The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model ¹

2. Body

This chapter discusses the data findings and analysis of the three different tools used to conduct this study: survey, oral interviews, and observation. The survey was completed by 50 teachers in the district of Saida, Lebanon. The purpose of the study is to show the impact of a balanced and effective literacy program on the gradual release of the student's dependency.

The objectives of the study were to:

- Show that a huge percentage of Lebanese teachers are unaware of the real meaning/ concept of literacy.
- Prove that teachers have to be fully trained on balanced and effective literacy programs to be applied in their classrooms.
- Show that an effective and balanced literacy program is very helpful for students' independent learning.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was hard to reach all the 50 teachers in person; the researcher was able to send the survey link and teachers filled the survey online. The survey doesn't require the teachers' names or any other personal details, yet the researcher guaranteed that all answers are confidential and taken for academic purposes.

¹ The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model <https://strategiesforspecialinterventions.weebly.com/i-do-we-do-you-do.html>

2.1. How Data is Presented

The researcher chose to display all the collected data in form of tables, charts, and graphs. Each will be described and interpreted thoroughly. Although the survey includes 12 questions only, it can be segmented into five different sections:

- Part (A): Bio Data from Respondents
- Part (B): School type
- Part (C): University Degree
- Part (D): Literacy Strategies
- Part (E): Training Workshop

2.1.1. Part (A): Bio Data from Respondents

As the survey doesn’t ask personal questions, the researcher doesn’t know the names, ages, and the gender of the respondents. The researcher also took into consideration that these details don’t serve the study. Respondents were classified based on the level they teach and the type of school they teach in.

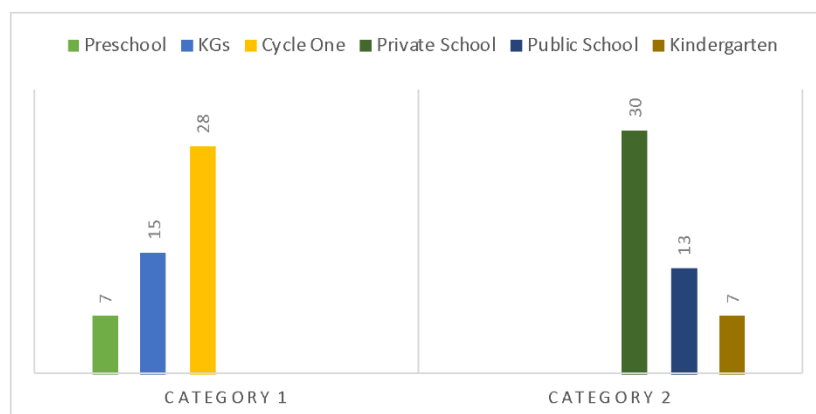


Figure 2: Teachers’ Classification²

The above figures show the number of respondents to the survey. 28 teachers out of 50 teach cycle one which counts as 56% of the whole sum. Teachers who teach KGs are 15 which is 30%; while kindergarten teachers are only 7 out of 50 which forms 14% of the whole sum. Schools are classified according to public schools and private ones. Private schools have more facilities than public schools as students pay a huge amount of school fees. The number of teachers that teach in private schools is 30, which is larger than 13, of the teachers who teach in public schools.

2.2. The Main Findings

The survey asks 12 different and necessary questions that serve the purpose of the study. The respondents felt more comfortable and were very honest while answering the questions because the survey doesn’t ask for their identity. Some people wouldn’t be honest when they share their names because they don’t want to be judged by the researcher. Not mentioning the names gave all respondents a sense of freedom to respond clearly and honestly. It was mandatory to ask all teachers whether they use literacy strategies in their classroom and how often they use it.

² Survey’s participants were classified according to the level they teach and the type of school they teach in.

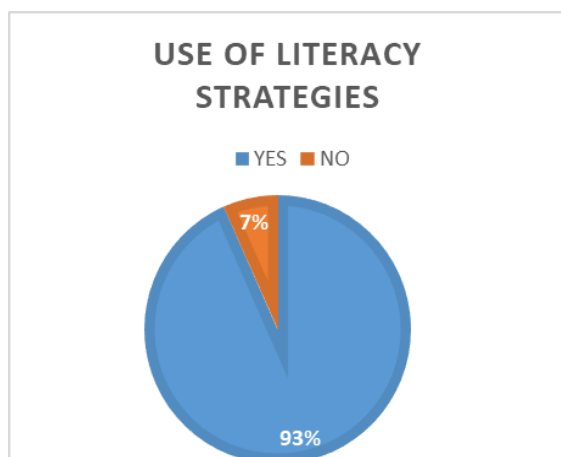


Figure 3: Use of Literacy Strategies³

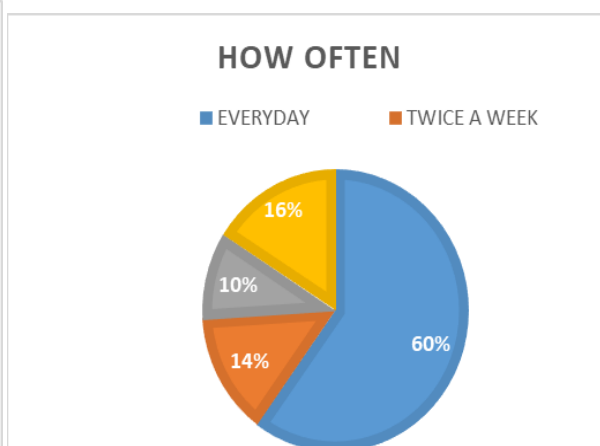


Figure 4: How often do teachers use Literacy Strategies?⁴

The above figures show that the majority of teachers use literacy strategies in their classrooms as 93% of the respondents confirmed that they use several and various literacy strategies while teaching. Only 7% of teachers don't use literacy strategies although they teach elementary and preschool levels where literacy strategies are mandatory. Furthermore, only 60% of teachers use these strategies every day while the rest of the teachers use them twice a week (14%) and thrice a week (10%). 16% of the teachers don't use literacy strategies at all.

Primary school levels, as well as pre-schoolers, have to apply literacy strategies as they are essential for their educational development. "What makes a high-schooler is a pre-schooler". Thus, the researcher asked the teachers if they are aware of the most significant two literacy strategies, The Daily 5 and the Four Blocks. These two strategies are considered the bedrock of teaching effective and balanced literacy programs. The answers were classified as follows:

Table 1.

The use of "Daily 5" & "Four Blocks" Literacy Strategies⁵

	YES	NO
Have you ever heard of the Daily 5 literacy strategy?	32	18
Have you ever heard of the Four Blocks literacy strategy?	10	40

The above table shows that 18 teachers have never heard of the Daily 5 literacy strategies and 40 of them haven't heard of the Four Blocks literacy strategy although they all teach primary levels.

Unfortunately, some schools in Lebanon hire teachers who are not experts in the field of education and they assign them to teach primary levels. Such people believe that the primary level doesn't need hard work, a university major, and experience; which is not true. Thus, the researcher asked the participants if they have university degrees and what their major is. All respondents have university degrees but only 5 out of 50 haven't graduated yet. However, not all majors and fields of study are related to education or teaching.

³ The majority of teachers use literacy strategies in their classrooms.

⁴ When applying literacy programs, teachers have to use literacy strategies on daily basis.

⁵ Some instructors do use literacy strategies every day but they are unaware of the terms used.

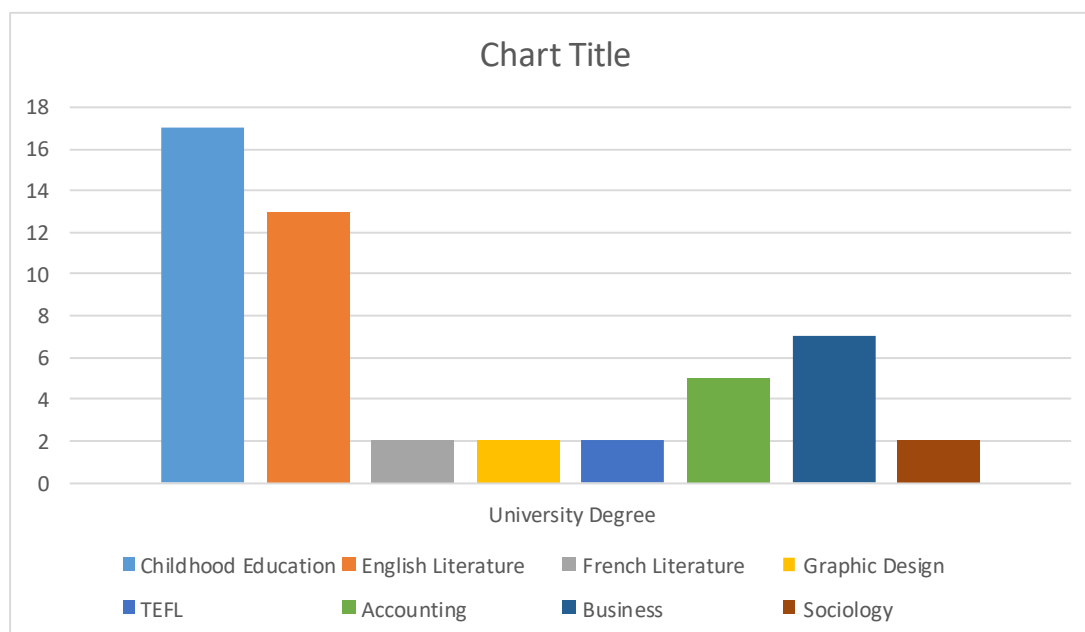


Figure 5: Survey’s Respondents’ University Degrees⁶

The survey shows that kindergarten and primary level teachers have miscellaneous university majors. Only 17 teachers out of 50 graduated with a degree in Childhood Education which is relevant and convenient to teach at this level. The rest of the teachers are students of literature, sociology, business, accounting, and graphic design.

The researcher asked the participants if they are interested in registering for a training workshop where they can be aware of the real definition of an effective literacy program as well as the essential strategies a teacher can use to improve the teaching and learning process. Almost all the respondents showed interest in attending the workshop as 48 respondents out of 50 agreed to attend the workshop.

In fact, the researcher wanted to reach the highest point an effective literacy program can reach, which is independent learning. It is important to know if educators believe that students can be gradually independent in the learning process. 70% of the teachers believe that learners can learn independently.

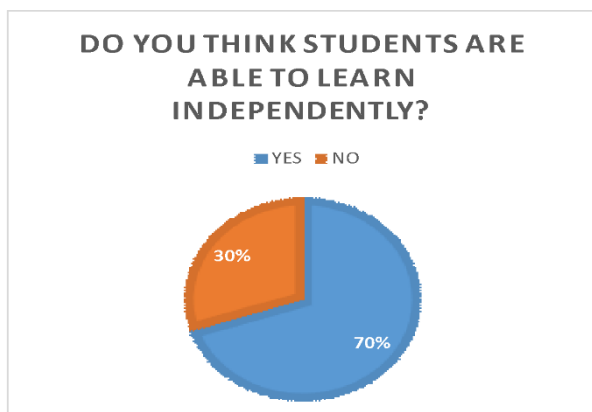


Figure 6: Independent Learning⁷

⁶ Instructors who usually deal with preschoolers and primary levels must have convenient university degree.

⁷ Learners can gradually reach a point when they can learn independently if a literacy program is applied effectively.

3. Conclusion

Based on the results listed above and the observation the researcher has held for almost two years, it is clear that our educational systems and premeditated curricula need a huge process of rebooting. Radical changes are mandatory. Schools have to be adjusted and modified according to the educational improvements and technological empowerment the world has reached so far. The survey conducted was able to know that not all teachers use literacy strategies in the primary level classrooms and some other instructors use them often although these classrooms cannot be taught without such lessons and these lessons must be applied on daily basis with the involvement of all students. What is also odd is that teachers are kind of unaware of literacy terms and essential literacy strategies. When it comes to Daily 5 and Four Blocks literacy strategies, it means that the student is exposed to guided reading, shared reading, guided writing, shared writing, word work (vocabulary), phonics awareness, and oral/listening. Thus, these 2 strategies are considered the substratum of any literacy curricula, and teachers who are unaware of them or haven't experienced such curricula shouldn't be responsible for primary levels. Learners, regardless of their age, are smart enough to evaluate a teacher's knowledge. Building a teacher-student trust is mandatory for any successful teaching and learning process (Postholm, 2018).

It is totally unacceptable to underestimate preschool and primary levels. A random person who has a random university degree with bilingual abilities isn't good enough to be a language instructor. For instance, a teacher who graduated as a graphic designer with no experience in teaching shouldn't be hired to teach primary-level students even if her/his language is good. Teaching language is way harder than anyone would think. The instructor has to have teaching and learning skills, time management, leadership, planning skills, and an infinite number of potentials and abilities to be able to drench so deep within every learner's personality and mentality. The instructor has to build sturdy bedrock with a very comfortable setting and environment before even thinking about books, lessons, and curriculums.

Reaching the highest university degree doesn't mean that you stopped learning, especially if you are an educator. Every pupil you meet throughout your educational journey will teach you something you didn't know you don't know. Great educators are those who believe that there is always something behind every good and bad behavior. Learners often remember the instructors who understand them and stand in their shoes without judging them. Learners will always remember the educators who were able to teach them through play, fun, and unforgettable strategies; those who never asked their students to memories but to understand and apply instead.

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documents such as annual breakdowns, scope, and sequence, and the objectives held for each level.

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