

# The Impact of Different Teaching Strategies on Teaching Spelling to Kindergarten Children

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**Abstract**—Many specialists in the field of foreign language teaching consider spelling as an important and perhaps necessary part in language teaching, and observe that spelling is a significant concern among both the language arts community and the public. The teaching of spelling is an issue that provokes strong feelings and attitudes in teachers, students, and parents as well, and those involved have strong opinions about the importance of correct spelling at school. A close look at the role of spelling in the general language curriculum, makes it known that learning to write and read in the whole language can benefit greatly from teaching spelling. Searching the Net under the keywords ‘spelling’ and ‘teaching spelling’ reveals many studies on spelling and the interest of the readers. In this study, we made use of two techniques to teach spelling, which included “the Personalized Instruction Technique”, or simply the PI technique, and “the Detection Technique” or the D technique. Meanwhile, a control group was included to make up for and take into account any possible background differences. 82 kindergarten children, studying at three kindergartens in Tarom, Zanjan, took part in the study. They were randomly assigned to three groups: one control group and two experimental groups. The PI group consisted of 28 kindergarten students both boys and girls, and the Group comprised 27 kindergarten students, both boys and girls. The control group, too, contained 27 kindergarten students, both boys and girls. The findings indicated that both the experimental groups that used the spelling techniques performed significantly better than the control group. Meanwhile, the PI group exceeded the DT group.

**Index Terms**—spelling, teaching spelling, Personalized Instruction (PI) technique, and Detection technique (D)

## I. INTRODUCTION

Correct spelling is not a separate skill restricted to a test of spelling. Spelling ability is one of the sub-skills of practical and effective written communication. In recent years, interest in the subject of children’s spelling and how to teach it, has developed enormously both in the public and in the individual professionals, as evidenced by the growing number of research papers and articles in professional language teaching and research journals. Spelling is of great concern for classroom teachers, parents and learners. Specialists consider spelling as a tool for communication, not an end in itself (Chandler, 2000).

The study has important implications for students, teachers, and material developers. Students can make improvements in their own spelling skill by using the techniques mentioned in the study, and consequently enhance their writing and reading ability. At the elementary levels, learning to read and write is all important and spelling is the medium through which this objective could be achieved. If teachers realize these spelling techniques effectively in their teaching practices, students could benefit from it and improve their reading and writing ability. Material developers and syllabus designers can make use of these findings for providing better conditions for learning and teaching; they can help students, especially at the elementary level read effectively and have meaningful comprehension.

## II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

### A. The Importance of Spelling

What is the significance of spelling and the teaching of it while, in our modern societies, computers spell everything easily and correctly? What is the reason for failure in developing reading skills in children and even adults? Studies indicate that children are not acquiring written language system. If children cannot read efficiently, they will encounter problems in educational subjects in which writing is necessary. In combined teaching of the two skills, reading and spelling, one encourages and enhances the other leading to a better and effective learning and success in students.

Considering teaching spelling, one view maintains that, as favored by some researchers, in writing, the ideas to convey and the quality of the language used for communication are far more significant than accurate spelling, and placing too much emphasis on accuracy, at the cost of fluency, in spelling hinders children’s tendency to write. This overemphasis on spelling, directs their mental efforts toward the lower-level cognitive process of encoding each word

correctly, rather than to the higher-order processes involved in generating new ideas and expressing these in an interesting written form (Huxford, McGonagle & Warren, 1997).

A different perspective holds that accurate spelling is of great significance and teaching spelling skills to help students master spelling principles (Meeks, 2003). As a common belief, a person's literacy is assessed by others based on his ability in spelling correctly in daily written communications, such as in letters, reports and application forms.

Poor spelling hinders academic performance in a number of ways. Researchers believe that inaccurate spelling reduces intelligibility of written work, and implies to others the impression that the writer is either careless or less intelligent than other students (Graham, Harris & Chorzempa, 2002; Stewart & Cegelka, 1995). This problem even gets worse for dyslexic students. Thomson (1995) holds that in many schools and universities the written work of intelligent students with dyslexia is frequently misjudged and undervalued due to the large number of spelling errors it contains. Graham (2000) and Schlagal (2002) in a comprehensive article review provide a thorough detailed analysis of different views on the importance of spelling.

By combining the teaching of reading and writing with spelling, we can attain the objectives faster which, in turn, leads to ease of learning; we can make sure that learning is happening, and eventually have more confident learners who can become writers and readers and communicate their viewpoints practically and effectively which is an optimal goal of teaching and learning. Spelling fixes learning into long-term memory and provides conditions for a more tangible practice and creates information concerning sounds, rules and concepts that have been learned. Spelling is also a key element in diagnostic teaching (Carreker, 2005).

Based on research findings, a structured systematic phonic approach is an effective way to teach students suffering from dyslexia (learning disability characterized by difficulty in reading and writing). According to research conducted by The National Reading Panel, effective reading programs should include phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (Report of the National Reading Panel, 2000; Carreker, 2005)

Anna Gillingham, using the scholarly findings of Samuel T. Orton and co-working with Bessie Stillman, developed *Remedial Training for Children* (Gillingham, Stillman, 1960) to teaching reading, writing, and spelling which is widely used with students of all ages who have difficulty learning written language skills. The Orton-Gillingham Approach is alphabetic-phonetic, based on the letter-sound connection that forms the basis of the English language. In this approach, sounds and word families are taught simultaneously with rules governing reading and spelling. It is a cognitive approach. The learner understands how he is learning and develops strategies for reading and spelling without relying on memory alone. Reading and spelling, when taught simultaneously, are mutually reinforcing (Moats & Farrell, 2005).

### B. Spelling Instruction

Adopting certain instructional strategies to achieve the intended aims seems to be an important issue in teaching spelling. Instruction should be sequenced with great care to build up from general, regular words to specific, specialized words. According to Steve Graham (2000) evaluation of instructional approaches to spelling, such as the 'natural learning method', is essential as ineffective programs may result in arrested spelling development, and this, in turn, may constrain other aspects of literacy. The acquisition of spelling knowledge can enhance reading acquisition by extending and reinforcing children's orthographic knowledge (Graham 2000).

Traditionally, in the primary schools, teachers provided spelling lists based on some word lists or the vocabulary students acquired in the textbook. Students, sometimes, were asked to correct the spelling errors of their own writing papers or those of their peers, too. In addition, they were expected to write each correction several times for additional practice (Westwood, 2005). It was a systematic approach in that, students spelling needs were addressed and parents and teachers knew how to handle spelling in schools.

However, there are major deficiencies in this traditional approach. The main shortcoming was that children might memorize words from lists but often not spell them correctly when they used them later in their writing (Beckham-Hungler & Williams, 2003). Meanwhile, a major limitation of the word list is that there are wide variations in children's spelling ability, and that teachers expected children to memorize words without teaching them any specific strategies to build effective spelling techniques (Westwood, 2005).

This strategy was by no means effective in teaching spelling skills. This old strategy is quite opposed to the common belief in modern psychology and in novel learning and teaching theories, especially to the *meaningful learning* theory which involves that for learning to occur, new material should be linked to the background knowledge. The traditional approach is in accordance with *rote learning* which states that repetition and practice would store patterns in the memory. According to Templeton (2004), learning to spell is not the same as memorizing words, but rather understanding patterns that apply to a large number of words.

With the emergence of the 'whole language' or 'natural' approach to language teaching, spelling was no longer an isolated skill for which to set a special time, but rather it was handled within the context of the children's everyday writing. Teaching spelling as a separate subject is frowned upon, since it is felt that such an approach decontextualizes word study and does not link the importance of spelling with authentic attempts at communication. It is assumed that studying isolated words will not help the child transfer and use this knowledge in writing. The underlying belief is that children can be helped to acquire proficiency in spelling simply through engaging in a great deal of daily writing with regular constructive feedback from the teacher and from peers (Westwood, 2005).

Later on the practicality and suitability of incidental teaching of spelling was questioned, especially for students with learning problems. While, contrary to the common sense, some children will progress quite rapidly with little or no explicit instruction, others will make much greater progress if they are explicitly provided the skills and strategies needed to take them from one stage to the next (Graham, 2000). To Bosman and Bartelings (2003), as cited in (Westwood, 2005), students with spelling difficulties do not learn effectively and cannot develop an awareness of spelling generalizations simply through random experience with words, and instead require direct teaching. Gentry (2001), in line with the above-mentioned researchers, holds that most students do not attain spelling skills from mere exposure to reading and writing, rather a combination of reading, writing, and direct spelling instruction.

### C. Stages in Spelling

Some specialists (Bryant, 2002; Helman, 2004) hold that spelling acquisition is a developmental process. Spelling ability advances through a series of interconnected stages, each stage reflects the children's existing knowledge about speech sounds and the specific strategies they are utilizing in their spelling.

In order to decide the developmental stage of spelling, it is wise to consider the following guidelines:

- base your generalization on many different samples on different topics and under different conditions.
- discuss with the student the strategies he or she uses when faced with writing an unfamiliar word (Dahl et al., 2003).

Westwood (2005) in a comprehensive and profound study divides these stages into the following divisions. The **pre-phonemic stage** is marked with the child imitating writing by copying down or inventing random strings of letters. In **early phonetic stage**, the child begins to use incidentally acquired knowledge of letter names and sounds in an attempt to write words. The **phonetic stage** is marked with the child's more accurate use of regular sound-symbol relationships. **Transitional Stage** is characterized the phase in which students have acquired a much more sophisticated understanding of word structure. The final stage, according to Westwood, is the **independence stage** where students are competent and can make use of a very wide range of strategies for checking and self-correcting words (Westwood, 2005).

### D. Spelling and Reading

Good readers are generally good spellers. Reading and spelling are related and explicit instruction in spelling has a beneficial impact on children's reading in the early years of schooling (Berninger et al., 1998). According to Graham, Harris and Chorzempa (2002), some experts in the literacy field believe the relationship between reading and spelling is very close, and that learning about spelling enhances reading ability.

Spelling skill, writing, and reading ability are inter-related and improving spelling will eventually lead to a mastery in reading and writing. Reading Specialists maintain that spelling reinforce the link between sounds and letters, and learning high-frequency words improves both reading and writing. Joshi, Treiman, Carreker and Moats (2008, 2009) describe this relationship as, "The correlation between spelling and reading comprehension is high because both depend on a common denominator: proficiency with language". Reading is greatly important especially to EFL (English as foreign language) learners who rarely have an opportunity to speak English in their everyday lives (Razi, 2010). According to Susan Jones (2009), spelling improves reading and writing fluency as well as vocabulary and comprehension.

### E. The Notion of Good and Poor Spellers

There are some features that characterize good and poor spellers. Good spellers make active use of strategies for recognizing sound sequences (Dahl et al., 2003), and try to monitor their spelling and self-correct. They are aware of the possible and impossible combinations of strings of sounds. They skillfully use different mnemonic strategies and are interested in word study and take advantage of resources available to them.

Poor spelling, on the other hand, may be due to faulty or inadequate instruction or a failure in using appropriate strategies. These students should be provided with writing situations in which positive and supportive feedback is presented to make sure they are advancing and internalizing spelling skills. In acquiring the principles of writing and spelling, especially in elementary students who are the concern of this study, it is necessary to raise their awareness of the phonological processes as an essential prerequisite for reading and spelling (Chan & Dally, 2000). Weaknesses in the spelling of these students could be made up for, for example, by limiting the number of words, focusing on high frequency words, discussing sources of errors with the students, teaching them self-monitoring techniques, and frequent revision and peer tutoring (Graham, 2000; Moats, 1995).

### F. Teaching Spelling

In teaching spelling, some basic principles and approaches should be adopted using continued instruction and regular testing. According to O'Sullivan (2000), effective teaching involves having children think about spelling, discussing issues in relation to spelling, and actively demonstrating approaches to learning to spell. Effective teaching needs to take into account the building of positive attitudes, promoting students' on-going interest in words, and teaching strategies for learning (Redfern, 1993). Good teaching is not only teaching word knowledge, but also strategy training of writing, reflection, revising, monitoring, and self-correction.

#### 1. Word study

"Word study" is the opposite pole to the traditional spelling instruction. It is based on learning word patterns rather than memorizing unconnected words. Studying the pattern and formation of words is an indispensable element of all effective instruction to spelling which reflects the developmental stage of the learner. A word study program is a cohesive approach that addresses word recognition, vocabulary, and phonics as well as spelling (Zutell, 1992). For a better word study, teachers and students try to understand word patterns and how words are connected to one another, and it is the task of the students to make generalizations and discover the patterns by comparing and contrasting words.

## 2. Teaching phonics

Phonics is a systematic attempt to teach the sounds conveyed by letters or strings of letters, and instructing students to mix letters to spell words. The Knowledge of when and how to pronounce a letter, and how a certain part of a word is stressed, is a crucial aspect of the meaning of words. Teaching phonics can improve spelling in the beginning stages in a number of ways for a variety of reasons including:

- A great deal of information conveyed by letters involves sounds.
- Direct observation in schools has shown a consistent link between phonics and successful reading (Rose, 2006).
- We are not fluent readers unless we read correctly, which requires accurate use of the information conveyed by letters.
- As English is not completely regular, most children are unlikely to be able to perceive and use patterns in language for themselves (Rose, 2006).

### G. The Instructional Techniques in the Study

#### 1. The Personalized Instruction Technique

The researcher came to the idea of the efficiency of the *personalized instruction technique* during his experience of teaching English and made effective use of it during the time. Personalization is a key notion in the modern theories of teaching and learning. In this technique, it was tried to connect each letter/sound to the initial letter/sound of the children's own names, objects, relatives, favorite TV programs, cartoon characters, etc. For example, the letter A could stand for Ali, a boy in the group, B for Behnaz, a 5-year-old girl, F for Fatima, H for Hadi, J for the lovely Walt Disney character Jerry, T for Tom, and so forth. All the children could make connections, in an effective way, between these letters and their own favorite things or persons in one way or another. The association between the letters and the objects or people, resulted in permanent storage and retrieval of the letters. It was so amazing that all parents expressed their deeply-felt gratitude to the author. One mother, holding me on the street, told me that his 6-year-old girl reads whatever letters she sees on the packets, boxes, walls, posters, TV, and so on. For all parents as well as children, it was a startling experience which helped make a rich perfect basis for the children's later English spelling.

#### 2. The Detection Technique

The other instructional technique used in the study was *the detection technique*. In this technique, the children were asked to identify the letter, presented to them during the session, wherever they could find them. This group was given numerous sources including a newspaper page, a page in a story or other similar material to circle the sound or highlight it using a favorite color. In addition to these, they were allowed to find and underline the letters in packages, bags, boxes, envelopes or even on their clothing, and the like.

## III. METHOD

### A. Participants

Three kindergarten centers in Tarom, Zanjan were selected to take part in this study. The children in these three kindergartens were roughly all at the same age, five or six years old, consisting of both boys and girls. None of these children had prior experience in the English language instruction and this was the first time they were introduced to English. All the participants were fluent Persian speakers, but most of them were bilinguals and could understand both Turkish and Persian and only a minor group of them was able to understand Tati, a native language spoken in some parts of Tarom.

The participants had no formal training before the study, even in Persian, and not even one of them could read and write a word of Persian, let alone English. The parents, whose children were involved in the study, were all enthusiastic to observe the result of the study and this was very helpful to the researcher. They were assigned to three groups: two groups for the two techniques used in this paper and one to control group. The *personalized instruction technique*, or simply the PI technique, consisted of 28 children both boys and girls, and the *detection technique*, or just the D technique, comprised 27 children both boys and girls. Meanwhile, to take into account the background differences and previous knowledge among the children, the third group was assigned to control group.

### B. Instrumentation

#### 1. Pre-test

The children in the study had no formal training in Persian and they could not read or write in Persian, too. Since, this was the first time they attended an English class, so the current researcher could make sure there were no previous differences among them. However, the researcher tested the children on some basic elementary questions on the English letters 'spelling and reading. As expected, this observation (pretest) revealed that they were absolutely illiterate

concerning their knowledge of English spelling. Of course, to reduce the probable effects of other irrelevant factors on the study, the researcher decided to include a control group into the study, too. All groups were at the same level concerning their English background i.e. no English at all, and all groups' performance was the same in the initial phase prior to the experiment. In this way, groups' homogeneity was ascertained and allowed for enquiry.

### 2. Post-test

Since, there was no standard test for our purpose, the researcher had to develop a test. The researcher tested the children on the English language letters presented to them during a course of two months. The test was tape recorded to eliminate any probable inconsistencies in the manner of conducting it. For a better outcome, the author brought the tape recorder several times to the classroom so as to remove the presence effect of the tape recorder and the problem of distracting students' attention during the actual test implementation. The problem of distraction was very important as children at those ages are all curious and playful and the sudden arrival of a recorder could influence test result.

### 3. The on-going quizzes

In addition to the posttest, three other quizzes were given to the children. These quizzes were intended to make sure of the on-going beneficial impacts of the instructional techniques. Each of these quizzes was given after the introduction of about 10 letters. These quizzes helped the posttest take shape and refine the manner of its implementation. They also introduced the children to the way they were to be tested.

### 4. The questionnaire

In addition to the tests introduced earlier, the researcher made use of a simple questionnaire in the study to assess the impressions and attitudes of the children concerning the use of instructional techniques. As the children could not read or write, the questionnaire was conducted in an oral format. The same questionnaire with minor revision was given to the parents in an attempt to check their viewpoints regarding the study.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. The Post-test

All the three groups were assessed on the letters of the English language at the end of the program. The tests only consisted of isolated letters, but not combined together, as the letters were presented in isolation and the children could not attend to combined letters or words at this age. This posttest was a simple test consisting all the letters, but in displaced order, which were recorded and presented to them to remove any inconsistencies in manner and provide uniformity and have homogeneous results. The posttest was aimed to observe the results of the intervention and the success or failure of the techniques. The posttest was straightforward; in one part of the test, the children were asked to write down what they heard from the tape recorder. In the other part, they were required to identify in a piece of writing, letters they heard.

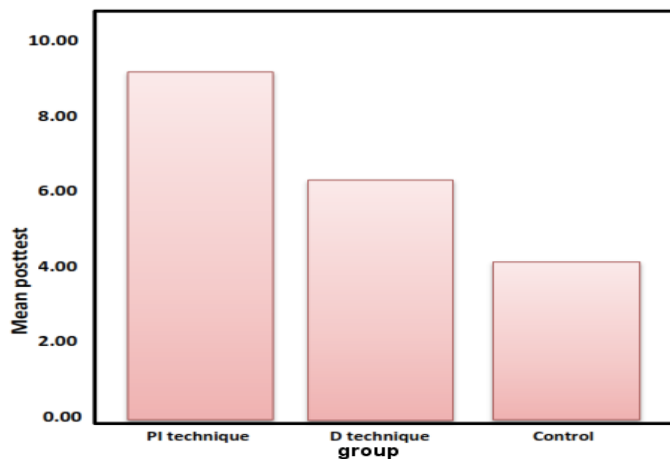


Chart 4.1 Comparing the Results of All Groups in the Post Test

The results highlight the important changes taken place due to applying the spelling techniques. This is a confirmation of the positive impact of these techniques on the spelling skill of the children in the study. As the means in the post-test suggest, the control group with no treatment shows no such changes and improvement in performance. Thus, the first hypothesis, on the success or failure of the techniques, is rejected as these techniques *do* lead to a better and more effective spelling skill.

The first research question concerns efficiency of the spelling techniques. As confirmed by the results of the tests, illustrated by the above chart, these techniques are all helpful and all enhance spelling. Thus, both techniques implemented in the study significantly lead to a better performance, the degree of change, however, is not equally the same for both techniques.

The other finding concerns the second research question (the most effective technique) and the second hypothesis. Based on these results, the answer to the second question is presented here. It seems that the PI technique is more effective as compared to the other technique. Taking a look at the chart, the post-test mean in the PI group is above the other group. The results also make clear that the D technique is not the most effective technique, rather, based on these findings, the most effective technique is the PI technique.

*B. Quizzes*

After the pretest observation, three tests were administered to all groups. The results revealed several facts; both the experimental groups outperformed the control group; compared to that of the other groups, the control group had a weak performance in these tests.

The PI group had the best results in the test. These findings conform to the previous results; therefore, we can seek answer to the research questions in the study. Both techniques actually led to effective spelling, but the PI technique was more efficient in this regard.

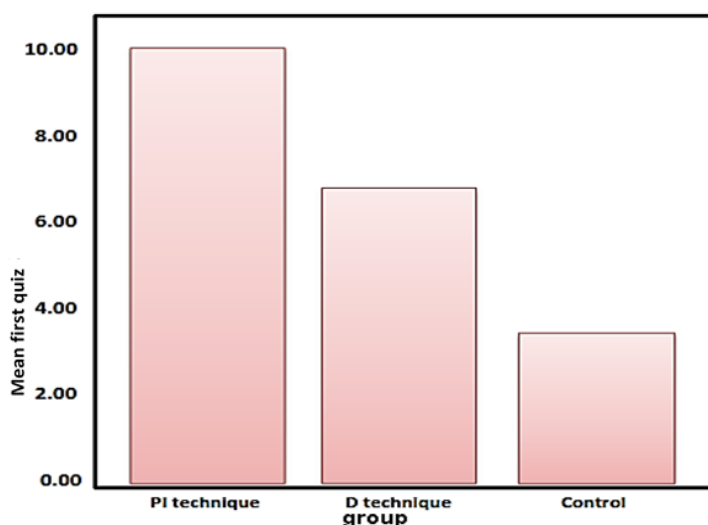


Chart 4.2 Comparing the Results of All Groups in the First Quiz

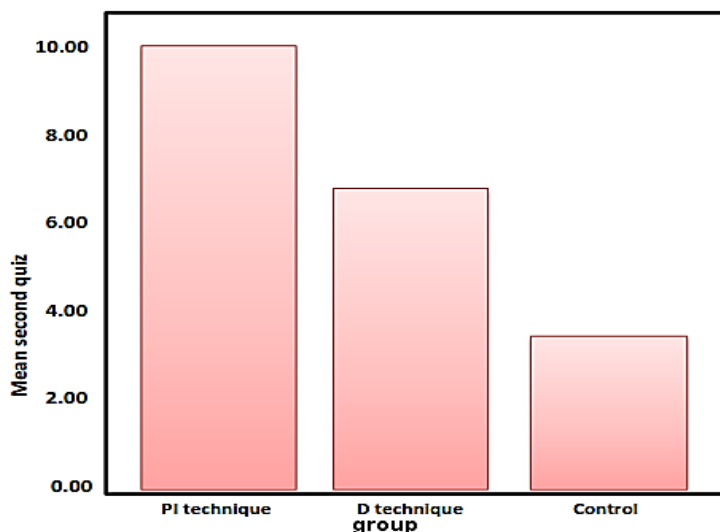


Chart 4.3 Comparing the Results of All Groups in the Second Quiz

Based on the findings, significant differences in the performances of the groups were observed. The mean scores of all tests in all groups were considerably above that of the control group; the control group had the lowest mean as compared to other two groups; that is, the instructional techniques had great impacts on the spelling skills of students in the experimental groups, but the control group had the weakest performance.

This analysis provides answer to the pre-posed research questions. The results reveal that all techniques led to more meaningful spelling ability. In line with previous findings, again, it was the PI technique which yielded better results as compared to the other spelling techniques.

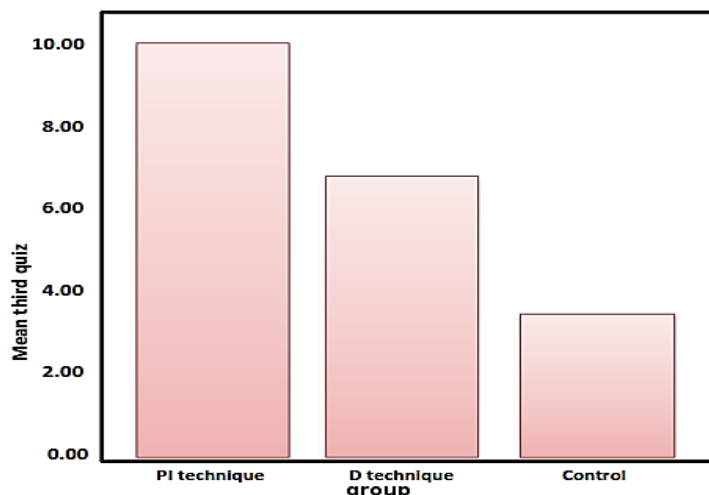


Chart 4.4 Comparing the Results of All Groups in the Third Quiz

## V. CONCLUSION

### A. Findings

This study aimed at evaluating the efficiency of the pre-posed spelling techniques (the personalized Instruction, and the Detection techniques) on kindergarten children. There were three research questions this paper tried to answer. The participants comprise 82 kindergarten children, both boys and girls, who were divided into two experimental groups, for the two techniques, and a control group.

The observation made as the pre-test, assured the researcher of the similarity and homogeneity of all three groups. The observation revealed that the students were at same level. All the participants in all groups made progress to a large extent except for those in the control group who received no treatment.

### B. Applications and Implications

In some situations, it seems that spelling, in contrast to grammar or writing, is handled as unnecessary devoid of any importance. However, teaching spelling is a specialty in its own turn. Familiarity with the stages involved in spelling process and activities which are special for each phase and applying them into classroom settings are of key help in the promotion of spelling skill in students.

In the present study, there were three research questions and hypotheses. Based on the findings in the study, we could draw the conclusion that the instructional techniques all lead to an effective spelling. The most successful technique in bringing about the change and improvement, based on this study, is the *PI* technique that yields better results than the other technique.

The *questionnaire* used in the study indicates that all participants, as well as their parents, enjoyed the instructional techniques and improved their spelling skill.

As for children, they could improve their own reading and spelling skill by using these spelling techniques. If students get familiar with these techniques, they could make more progress and gain an efficient reading and spelling.

The results of the study can potentially change EFL teachers' attitudes about the nature of spelling. Teachers, too, can help their students in achieving the intended change in them. They can introduce suitable spelling techniques and encourage the use of them. They can help their students by providing opportunities for the students to use these spelling techniques in practice in real situations. The role of EFL teacher is all important in this respect. He can make up for the shortcomings in the course books through his own experience and the provision of effective techniques (Hashemi, Mobini, and Karimkhanlooie, 2016).

Material developers, syllabus designers, parents, and all those in charge and involved in teaching and learning, can make use of these findings for providing better conditions for learning and teaching. Providing students with modern and scientific methods and techniques for learning is undoubtedly a great thing; we can help them to read effectively and have better comprehension and enjoy reading as fun (Hashemi, Mobini, and Karimkhanlooie, 2016).

### C. Suggestions for Further Research

In the present study, some variables such as gender were not taken into account. Further studies can focus on the role of gender and age range in comprehension. Future research, also can focus on other aspects of language and explore the efficiency of such techniques on other language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, and writing.



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